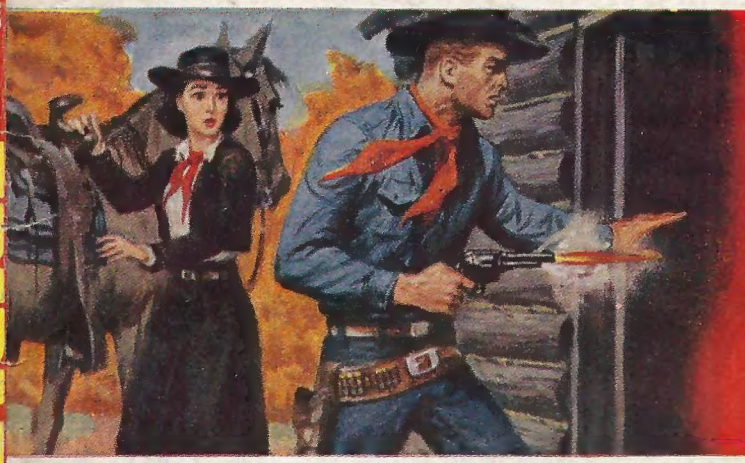
SPRING 25c

TRIPLE WESTERN

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE



She Hated Yet Loved The Gunman

RIDE ON, STRANGER
by Sally Tyree Smith

He Put Duty Above A Woman

ONE HELLUVA LAWMAN
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

Gunplay Was Far Overdue

LAST OF THE LONG S
by Walt Coburn

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Men! Send for This Money-Making Outfit *FREE!*

See How Easy It Is to Make UP TO $30.00 IN A DAY!

Do you want to make more money in full or spare time . . . as much as $30.00 in a day? Then mail the coupon below for this BIG OUTFIT, sent you FREE, containing more than 100 fine quality fabrics. sensational values in made-to-measure suits. topcoats, and overcoats. Take orders from friends, neighbors. fellow-workers. Every man prefers better-fitting, better-looking made-to-measure clothes. and when you show the many beautiful. high quality fabrics—mention the low prices for made-to-measure fit and style—and show our guarantee of satisfaction. you take orders right and left. You collect a big cash profit in advance on every order, and build up fine permanent income for yourself in spare or full time.

No Experience Needed

It's amazingly easy to take measures. and you don't need any experience to take orders. Everything is simply explained for you to cash in on this wonderful opportunity. Just mail this coupon now and we'll send you this big. valuable outfit filled with more than 100 fine fabrics and everything else you need to start. You'll say this is the greatest way to make money you ever saw Rush the coupon today!

STONE-FIELD CORP., Dept. P-977
532 S. Throop St., Chicago 7, Ill.

YOUR OWN SUITS WITHOUT 1c COST!

Our plan makes it easy for you to get your own personal suits, topcoats, and overcoats without paying 1c—**in addition** to your big cash earnings. Think of it! Not only do we start you on the road to making big money, but we also make it easy for you to get your own clothes without paying one penny.

Just Mail Coupon

You don't invest a penny of your money now or at any time. You don't pay money for samples, for outfits, or for your own suit under our remarkable plan. So do as other men have done—mail the coupon now. Don't send a penny. Just send us the coupon

STONE-FIELD CORP., Dept. P-977
532 S. Throop St., Chicago 7, Ill.

Dear Sir: I WANT MONEY AND I WANT A SUIT TO WEAR AND SHOW without paying 1c for it. Rush Valuable Suit Coupon and Sample Kit with actual fabrics ABSOLUTELY FREE.

Name..... Age.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

J. E. SMITH
President, National Radio Institute. 40 years' experience training men at home for Radio-TV.

I Will Send You A

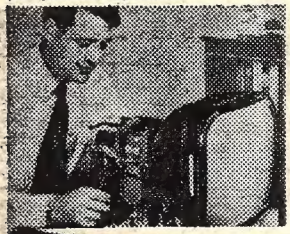
SAMPLE LESSON FREE

to show you how easy, practical it is to

Train at Home for Good Radio-Television Jobs

Make $10, $15 a Week Extra

Many men I train fix neighbors' Radios, make extra money, soon after they enroll. Actual equipment you build gives you practical experience.



America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay Plus a Bright Future

TRAINING plus OPPORTUNITY is the PERFECT combination for ambitious men. Let me send you a sample lesson from my course to prove you can keep your job while TRAINING at home in your spare time for better pay and a brighter future. I will also send my 64-page book to show you that Radio-Television is today's field of OPPORTUNITY for properly trained men.

Television's Growth is Making More Jobs, Prosperity

Radio is bigger than ever and television is growing fast. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Microwave Relay, Two Way Communications for buses, taxis, railroads are other growing fields for Radio-Television trained men.

Mail Coupon—Find Out About This Tested Way to Better Pay

Take NRI training for as little as $5 a month. Many NRI graduates make more in two weeks than the total cost of my training. Mail coupon today for Actual Lesson and 64-page Book—Both FREE. J. E. SMITH, National Radio Institute, Dept. 6CQ, Washington 9, D. C. Our 40th Year.

I Trained These Men

"I have a regular job as a police captain and also have a good spare time Radio and Television service business. Just opened my new showrooms and shop."—C. W. LEWIS, Pensacola, Florida.

"I decided to quit my job and do TV work full time. I love my work and am doing all right. If fellows knew what a wonderful investment NRI is, they would not hesitate."—W. F. KLINE, Cincinnati, Ohio.

"Thanks to NRI, I operated a successful Radio repair shop. Then I got a job with WPAQ, later WBOB and now am an engineer for WHPE."—VAN W. WORKMAN, High Point, N. Carolina.

You Learn by Practicing with Equipment I Send

Nothing takes the place of practical experience. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. My training includes kits of parts which you use to build equipment and get practical experience on circuits common to both Radio and Television. Shown at left is the low-power Broadcasting Transmitter you build as part of my Communications Course.

AVAILABLE TO **VETERANS** UNDER G.I. BILLS

Good for Both—FREE

Mr. J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 6CQ
National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D.C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name_____ Age_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

VETS write in date of discharge_____

Approved Member, National Home Study Council

THREE WESTERN ACTION NOVELS

TRIPLE WESTERN

VOL. 17, NO. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SPRING, 1956

RIDE ON, STRANGER

She was attracted and repelled by the gunman she'd hired, and somehow afraid of him and of the gunfire he was sure to bring

SALLY TYREE SMITH 8

ONE HELLUVA LAWMAN

They tried to make a scandal of the young lawman's visits to the shapely wife of another, before they went gunning for him

KENNETH L. SINCLAIR 46

LAST OF THE LONG S

Dave Ryan had but one slim chance left to save his ranch and he took it, even knowing it would probably cost him his life

WALT COBURN 78

THE TRAIL BOSS (A Department)	Murray T. Pringle	6
STRANGE TALE	Harold Helfer	23
GRAVE VOICE	E. J. Ritter, Jr.	57
BADMAN SAM (A Short Story)	Tex Mumford	99
REST YOUR SADDLE (A Short Story)	L. J. Searles	110
THE STAGE COACH	Corral Chatter	114

JIM HENDRYX, JR., Editor

"Last of The Long S," Copyright, 1950, by Best Publications, Inc., and originally published in October, 1950, Giant Western

TRIPLE WESTERN—Published quarterly and copyright, 1956, by Literary Enterprises, Inc., 1125 East Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), $3.50; single copies, 25c. Add 40c for Canadian, 75c for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number if any. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Spring, 1956, issue PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

Sickness and Accident Protection

WHETHER YOU ARE 15 OR 75 YEARS OLD

Includes $25 A Week Payments To You

Even As You Grow Older There Are No Reductions In Benefits

Costs Only $12 A Year {Just $2.50 Down Payment} Up To Age 59

Age 60 to 69—$18 a Year • Age 70 to 75—$24 a Year

The older you are, the harder it is to get protection against financial worries that come when accident or sickness strikes. That's why the reliable North American Accident Insurance Company, of Chicago, issues a special policy for qualified men and women up to 75 years of age. It helps meet sudden doctor and hospital bills—and the cost is only $12 a year for either men or women from 15 to 59 years old . . . only $18 a year from 60 to 69 years . . . from ages 70 to 75 only $24 a year. Easy payment plan if desired. The policy is renewable at the company's option. These rates are guaranteed as long as the policy is continued in force.

No doctor's examination required, merely your own statement as to your present health. If your policy is in effect at age 75, you may even continue it to age 80 at no further increase in premium. ABSOLUTELY NO REDUCTION IN BENEFITS REGARDLESS OF AGE. Protects you 24 hours a day while in the United States, Alaska, Canada, Mexico, Central and South America.

This is the popular, sound "SERIES 500" Limited Accident and Sickness Policy which thousands of men and women all over the country are carrying—it pays $25 a week for 10 weeks for total disability resulting from certain specified accidents and sicknesses; AN ADDITIONAL $25 A WEEK for 4 weeks from the first day of disability for accidents requiring hospital confinement. Even for a minor accident such as a cut finger you get cash for doctor bills at the rate of $3 per visit up to $25. In case of accidental death the policy pays $1,000 cash to your beneficiary. Specified air travel coverage also included. In addition, the policy covers many sicknesses including pneumonia, cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis, polio, ulcer of stomach or intestines, and operation for removal of appendix, hemorrhoids, gall bladder, kidney and prostate, paying the weekly benefit after the first seven days of confinement to either home or hospital.

Benefits are payable for covered accidents that happen after noon of the date the policy is issued. Benefits are paid for covered sicknesses originating after thirty days from the date the policy is issued. All disability benefits are paid directly to you to use any way you wish.

This fine policy also has a double indemnity feature covering travel accidents. You receive $50 a week if disabled by an accident to a bus, taxicab, train, subway or street car in which you are riding as a passenger; $75 a week if the accident requires hospital confinement. The death benefit increases to $2,000 if caused by a travel accident.

Following North American's tradition of plainly reciting not only the benefits of its policies but the restrictions in coverage, this policy is sold to qualified men and women in all occupations except Quarrymen, Underground Miners, Smelter or Structural Iron Workers, Longshoremen or Stevedores. This policy does not cover the insured for suicide or attempt thereat; while riding in any aircraft (unless injured while riding as a fare-paying passenger on regular commercial airliner operating between definitely established airports); venereal disease; hernia; felonious act; while walking on a railroad roadbed except while crossing a public highway; while in Military or Naval Service outside the 48 States of the United States and the District of Columbia.

Your benefits are never reduced even though you are also insured in a Group Plan, Blue Cross or other Hospitalization Insurance. So if you are now a member of some worthy hospitalization plan, you still need this additional protection. Only a small percentage of people are confined to a hospital, and even then for a fraction of the time they are hospitalized for a few days or a week, then spend home where hospitalization plans do not apply. Or, they are hospitalized for a few days or a week, then spend weeks of convalescence at home before they can go back to work again. The North American Policy pays specified benefits regardless of whether you are confined to your home or a hospital.

North American Accident Insurance Company has been in business for more than a half century and is one of the leading insurance companies providing accident and sickness protection. We have paid over $72,000,000.00 in cash benefits to grateful policyholders when they needed help most. NORTH AMERICAN IS LICENSED BY THE INSURANCE DEPARTMENTS OF ALL 48 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

Whatever your age, whether you are young or old, male or female, you need this sensible, necessary protection. Get full details by sending for the revealing booklet, "Cash or Sympathy." This booklet is absolutely free; it will be mailed without charge or obligation of any kind. We suggest you get your free copy by mailing the coupon to Premier Policy Division, North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago, 10 Commerce Court, Dept. 304, Newark 2, New Jersey.

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR **FREE** *BOOKLET*

Premier Policy Division

North American Accident Insurance Co., of Chicago

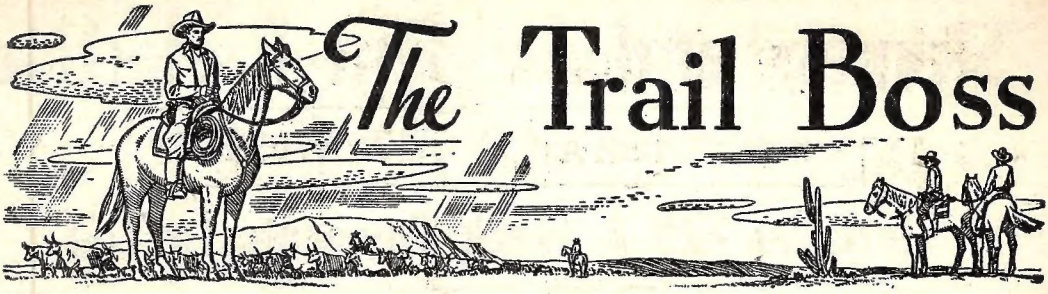
10 Commerce Court, Dept. 304, Newark 2, New Jersey

Please mail me your FREE booklet "CASH OR SYMPATHY." I understand there is absolutely no obligation of any kind.

NAME .....
(PLEASE PRINT)

ADDRESS .....

CITY ..... ZONE No. ..... STATE .....



The Trail Boss

LOST—ONE BARREL OF GOLD

By MURRAY T. PRINGLE

THE COOS BAY Treasure. Ever hear of it? Well, except for a few oldtimers, not even the townsfolk of Coos Bay, Oregon, know the treasure that lies a short auto trip from their doorsteps. But it's there, and sooner or later someone is going to dredge up a nice piece of change from the shifting sand hills 15 miles north of Coos Bay.

Back around the turn of the century a four-masted schooner, the Sunshine, prepared for her maiden voyage. Built for the E. B. Dean Company, her chief claim to fame was that she boasted the tallest sticks of any West Coast vessel. On the drawing boards she had been designed for speed, and when she graduated from draftsman's board to shipyard and thence to water, she gave every indication of becoming a veritable greyhound of the sea. Sleek, she was, with hollow bows and shallow draft and copper-sheathed bottom.

Hundreds of San Franciscans crowded the wharf to see her off and wish her well. An air of intrigue was lent to the general festivities with the arrival, minutes before the Sunshine was scheduled to cast off, of a half dozen heavily armed men and a small, sturdy and obviously heavy keg which was trundled aboard.

A magic word swept through the crowd. "Gold! It's gold in that keg. They're taking it to the bank at Coos Bay!" It was gold, all right, and it was destined for the bank. But it never got there.

The sea was as calm as it can ever be, and a brisk northwest wind waited to sweep the ship along. All in all it was a fine summer's day on which to begin a maiden voyage and it was the general consensus of opinion that the Sunshine would make a record run. There were, however, a few shipbuilders who expressed doubt about a vessel equipped with such overly tall masts.

When the scheduled date of arrival at Coos Bay came and the Sunshine didn't, everyone concerned began to worry. Weeks passed and finally the four-master was listed as lost with all hands. Nothing further was said or done about the ill-fated ship until some eight months later when two men drove a heavily laden wagon into the yard of the E. B. Dean Company.

"You wanna buy some copper?" asked one of the men. "We got a wagon load of the stuff out here."

A storekeeper inspected the load, then asked, "Where'd you men get this copper?"

"Off a wreck," was the reply. "Up in the sandhills. You wanna buy it?"

The storekeeper did, but he was even more anxious to have the location of the old wreck pointed out. He felt sure the copper was from the wreck of his company's ship, the Sunshine—the ship with a barrel of gold on board!"

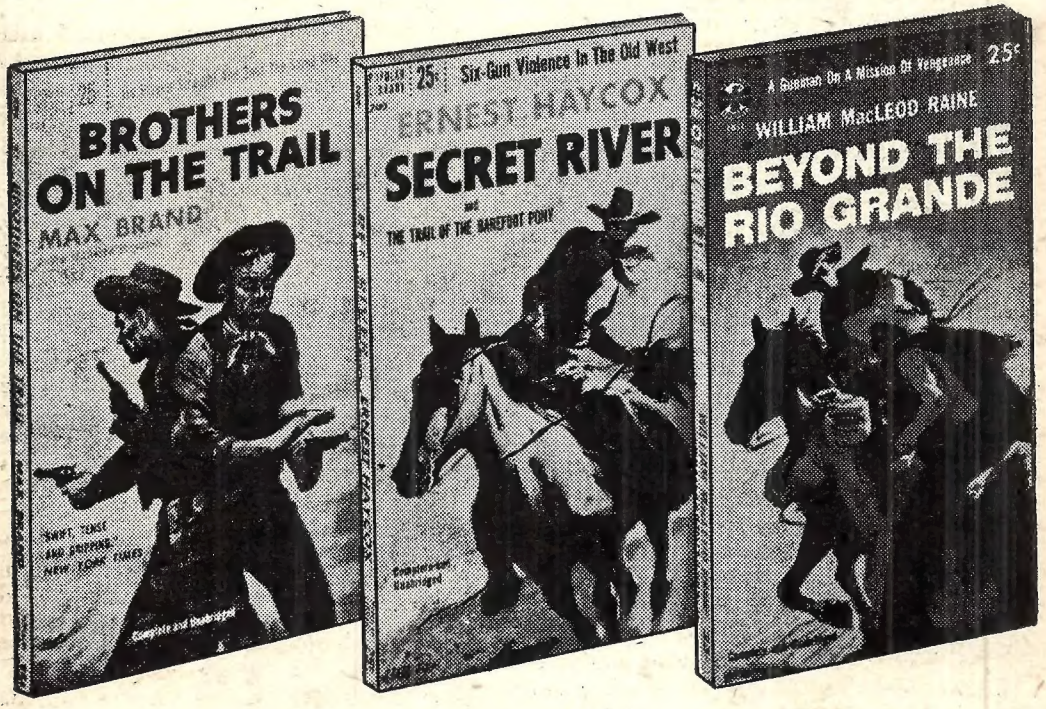
Company officials headed for the scene with the sandhill scavengers acting as guides. A groan went up when the men arrived at the approximate location. Nowhere was there a sign of a wreck. There was nothing but clean sand, drift piles and dunes.

Worse still, the men who had found the wreck were vague about its exact location and there were no landmarks. To make things even more frustrating, the sandhill country changes continually. A hill will drift a quarter of a mile in one year.

The feverish activity amidst the sandhills drew attention from the Coos Bay townsfolk and for the first time it was officially confirmed that the Sunshine had indeed carried

(Continued on Page 109)

From out of the LAWLESS WEST come these three hard-shooting, hard-riding POPULAR LIBRARY novels

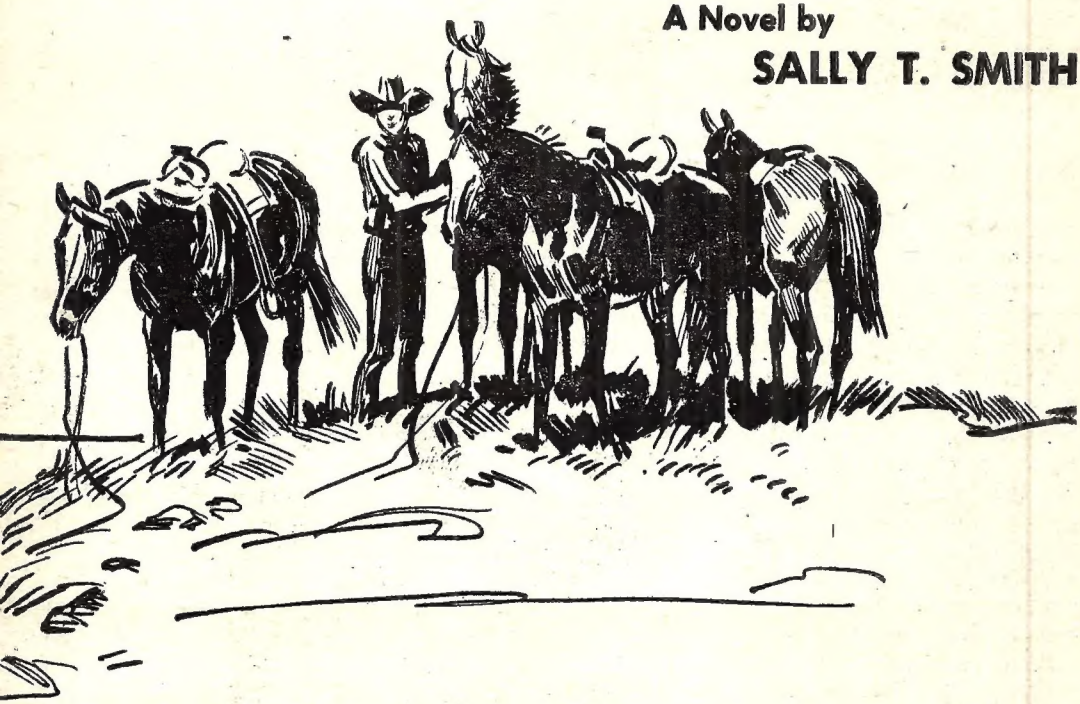


Don't miss these and other* POPULAR LIBRARY *bestsellers now on sale at all newsstands . . . only 25c

RIDE

ON, STRANGER

A Novel by
SALLY T. SMITH



The gunman she'd hired both attracted and repelled her—and suddenly she was afraid of him and of the harsh echoes of gunfire he was sure to bring

I

THE town was quiet. A dark quiet of wait. No man moved on the street. The tie-rack in front of the Sombrero was empty, with a curious naked look.

It was sundown in the valley. The heat of the sun left quickly, a cool wind coming up with the beginning shadows. Usually a time of day for a man to relax, forgetting his worries in a drink at the Sombrero or a talk with his neighbor. But tonight quiet hung over the town, making a veil for a stranger.

Juno halted at the edge of Tucum, motioning his men to gather around him. He spoke quietly.

"Wait here. We'll try to ride out of this without shooting up the whole town. Ride in fast if you hear a shot."

He turned to Celsa Torreon, owner of his outfit. his eyes gleaming in his dark face. He spaced his words carefully, not misunderstanding her look of guile. You will wait here—regardless!"

Celsa held her face smooth with an effort, excitement making her want to laugh or shout. She returned his look soberly until he wheeled his horse softly down the dark street. Main Street was lined with a double row of cottonwood trees and his long, lanky figure quickly mingled with the shadows.

Celsa waited out this time with a growing impatience before she gently urged her horse after him. She turned quickly at a startled exclamation from Fingers, the oldest man in the crew.

If nature had ever decided with freakish humor to rob a man of any naturally pleasant physical aspect she had chosen to do that with Fingers. He was completely bald, almost toothless, and his short round legs were humorously saddle-bowed—he had only three fingers on each worn, callused hand. No one knew the reason for this, because the first thing anyone learned on first meeting Fingers was that he went crazy wild at any mention of his personal appearance.

He squirmed under Celsa's cool regard, but he was determined.

"You're not going to town, Miss Celsa. Juno said plain you was to wait here."

Celsa's eyes flashed with bright anger, even though she was conscious of guilt. Juno had not wanted her to ride tonight. She had used his feeling for her, as she had before, to persuade him to let her come. He had relented reluctantly, unable to refuse her, but she had known he meant for her to stay out of it. Which only heightened her rebellion.

SHE straightened her slim height proudly as she said, "I'm still the owner of Torreon, and capable of running my own oufit."

Fingers regarded her steadily as his smooth face turned red.

She flushed suddenly and moved impulsively toward him. He was so doggedly loyal! A Torreon man who had been working for her father the day she was born. She laid her soft hand over his gnarled one.

"I'm sorry, Fingers." Her voice was low, but not too low to reach all the men—as she intended. "This means so much to me."

Fingers closed his crooked hand over hers. Almost he smiled down at the lovely face. "I know." And he reminded her gently, "I reckon it does to all of us."

She smiled at him as she wheeled away, and was walking her horse down the street before he could speak again. She tried to keep to the deepening shadows. But there would be no mistaking her figure in any light.

Fingers watched that slim figure blend into the shadows before he looked around at the rest of the crew with an expression that was heavily apprehensive. Juno was going to raise hell when he saw her. The men shook their heads sympathetically, smiling a little, admiring her as they always did. They knew there would be no stopping her. That she knew no such thing as fear was a familiar phrase—

Not exactly true right now because Celsa *was* a little afraid. But her stubborn determination was stronger.

She could not have told why she felt so strangely impelled to see a slim stranger ride into town. But the thought of him filled her mind.

If she was to hold Torreon after he rode through Tucum—it was going to take a smart, tough man to help her. Juno had a deep understanding, but his sweet nature was sometimes his undoing. He could not hold Torreon for her alone.

She caught her breath suddenly. Juno was just ahead, his unmistakable tall figure crouched in his saddle, only partially hidden from the street beside the livery barn. She jerked her reins quickly, guiding her mount into the shadow of a giant cottonwood. Her heart pounded with an aching slowness as she waited for him to ride back to try to force her to return to the crew. The minutes passed slowly before she relaxed. He wasn't coming. Either he hadn't seen her, or was more intent on the sounds made at the end of the street by a horseman who was riding into town.

In the dark, still night, the clatter of

hooves was sudden and loud. Celsa moved cautiously around the tree—and saw the slim man ride into town.

What happened then appeared to be deliberately casual. Men of the valley slowly moved out of concealing shadows. Suddenly a silhouetted figure stood in the mouth of the alley, other men were standing under the wooden awning of the general store.

The valley men had been warned! Juno had been afraid of this, Celsa thought.

A heavy man who pushed through the batwings of the Sombrero crossed the board walk and stopped in the dusty street. Unconsciously, Celsa stifled a quick protesting cry. Zeke Dooley! Yet she might have known Zeke would try to stop her.

Zeke, a red-headed giant of a man, fiery, arrogant, was comparatively new as a cattleman in the valley. He had bought several small ranches along Olla Creek and combined them into one big outfit. He had become a big man in the valley fast.

To think she had once tried to use this red giant to keep peace with the valley. She shuddered. What a fool she had been to think that soft words and smiles could answer the demand so plain in his pale eyes! Even Juno knew nothing about the night she had laughed in Zeke's face at his strange proposal. But after that first moment of shocked unbelief at how he had taken it, she had known he would never stop until she'd paid for that laugh.

HE WAS a compelling figure as he faced the slim stranger now, in the waiting silence of the street. Suddenly he stepped closer, thrusting his big head forward.

"You?" he exclaimed, a queer, puzzled note in his voice. "So it had to be you, riding through."

"Nothing is ever ended," the stranger answered him. He stared down at the big man, his face a pale mask in the moonlight. The soft cadences of the South in his voice sounded strange, heard like this.

Zeke said nothing, but his pale eyes were intent on the slim rider, and he seemed far removed from his surroundings. Men of the valley stirred uneasily as they watched him, not understanding.

"Just riding through Tucum Valley?" Zeke asked at last, and his deep, chesty voice did not sound natural.

"Perhaps."

"We don't always question a stranger when he rides into town," Zeke offered almost casually.

"Don't, then."

"Well, there's a reason now," Zeke explained. "There's been a little trouble in the valley and we're not encouraging strangers to stay."

"If I want to stay in the valley, I'll stay."

"Not unless you answer one thing!" A valley man stepped down beside Zeke—a square, solid man with features as blunt as his speech.

"Wait up, Gunthrie," Zeke commanded with bold authority. "I'll handle this."

"All right, Dooley," the man called Gunthrie flared, "You ask him! Ask him if Torreon sent for him!"

In the sudden quiet, every eye was on him, watching for his reaction to "Torreon." He looked from one to the other with cool indifference, his next soft words prodding them.

"Move off the road. I'm riding through."

Zeke, planted squarely in the middle of the street, didn't move, but his expression became challenging, as if he were trying to gauge the will behind the words, or remembering something from when he had last seen or known this man before. No one could ever tell just what was in Zeke Dooley's mind.

Gunthrie stepped closer, unable to control his unstable temper. "Well, by hell," he shouted at the rider, "you'll not ride through here until you answer questions and declare yourself!"

"I told you to wait, Gunthrie," Zeke said coldly. "It's not time for that kind of talk."

"Gunthrie's right," another man—a valley man named Sam Roscoe—said as he moved forward. His ranch bordered George Gunthrie's, and he had long since came to follow his neighbor's hand. "Are we going to let Torreon hire guns to shoot up the valley?"

Dooley swung on him with rough humor. "Now, how do you know this here feller's a Torreon man, that he's hired out to us, or is

a gunslinger at all?"

"How do we know he's not? Who can name him?" This man who spoke was Clarence Richey, a townsman, owner of the general store that catered to the valley.

Covertly they watched Dooley, all remembering his first words to the slim man. He stared back, bold and silent, not bothering to answer the unspoken question he read in their faces.

"I can name him!" came a shout from the end of the street.

Juno came riding down the middle of the street, his long right arm swinging loose and easy, a grin of malicious humor on his dark, ugly face. Juno in his element—in the middle of trouble!

"Name him, Juno!" shouts went up.

"Barney Ripple—a friend!" Juno's dark eyes flashed over the ranchers to see if any man among them recognized that infamous name.

AND now Sheriff Benson stepped in. He had to, before it was too late. He recognized the fear behind the anger of the valley men—a dangerous combination. But he was one of them, and they would listen to him. He was a young man, his weather-rough face sober and composed. His father had been sheriff in the valley before him—and a good man. Young Bill Benson, however, was as yet untried.

"I might be a little curious to know something more about your 'friend' myself, Juno," he announced quietly.

"You know the road to Torreon, Sheriff."

The light feminine voice that suddenly spoke from the dark, shocked the men in the street. Celsa had ridden up behind Juno. Her wide hat had slipped back and her black hair tumbled around her pale, delicate face. She was startlingly beautiful in the dim light, and proudly scornful as she looked down at the sheriff.

"I'll be riding it—if need be," Sheriff Benson replied with steady politeness. His young face colored as he looked up at her, but he did not turn away.

Celsa turned her head and met the narrowed opaque eyes of Barney Ripple. He was regarding her with gray indifference. She felt uneasy as she looked at him, for his cold eyes granted her nothing. But the eyes of the valley men did. The ranchers were embarrassed, and angry to find her suddenly in their midst. Plainly they were thinking that Cottonwood Street was no place for any young girl tonight. She could read that in their faces.

"If you are asking questions, why not ask some about this new rancher in the valley who is riding with you?" Celsa suggested, pointedly singling out Zeke Dooley.

Zeke looked amused. He was even pleased with the lively spirit of her which had brought her to town tonight. His pale glance swept over her with deliberate calculation, not caring who noticed. His look said he wanted her, and he didn't care who knew it.

After one brief look she ignored him. And if she was afraid of him it was not in her voice as she went on, "Perhaps you valley men are not unlike Torreon—once we thought we knew our friends."

As she spoke quietly, without rancor, she was carefully searching the faces of Gunthrie and Roscoe and the storekeeper, Richey. And of Grogan, one of the Sombrero men, who was watching her with shy reluctance through the shifting shadows. Once these men had ridden for Torreon, or had accepted its hospitality, but tonight they refused to meet her eyes.

"Let's ride," Juno drawled.

There would be no fight tonight, with Celsa in the middle of the street.

Barney Ripple touched his horse lightly, moving up beside Juno. Celsa wheeled her mount, and then the valley men heard only the sound of their galloping horses.

Gunthrie, stalking toward his horse at the rack, stopped short as he saw Zeke Dooley standing motionless, staring down the street.

"We going after 'em?" Gunthrie demanded.

"Not tonight," Zeke answered slowly.

They ignored Sheriff Benson, standing quietly on the boardwalk. He was listening, though, his face inscrutable.

"Juno knows those hills like an Injun—the play is theirs."

Zeke went on. He then stood without moving, but his pale eyes were fixed in

brooding intensity toward the direction of the faint sound of galloping horses. It was almost as if he were realizing he had made a mistake this night in not having recognized the slim man from some page in his past and have known he should have been stopped before he rode through Tucum.

II

JUNO did ride like an Indian through the dark night, never hesitating, never pulling up, going around the aspen-groved ravine and weaving through the tall pines on the mountain-side, always keeping away from the main trails.

He and the stranger in the valley, the Barney Ripple he had claimed as "friend," and Celsa Torreon were traveling steadily upward toward the end of the valley. It was not until they reached the summit of the mountain that Juno reined in to rest their horses.

It was almost daylight and Barney dismounted to look at the valley below. A gray misty haze did not entirely screen the plentiful grass and the cattle grazing on the ranches.

"Wouldn't you say that was enough for any man?" Juno asked, watching Barney's face.

"Nothing is ever enough for any man," said the slender rider.

"I reckon not. Give some men everything you got and they still want the moon for a cow pasture."

"And the moon is Torreon?"

Juno nodded, his dark brows scowling as he began talking of the trouble brewing in the valley. He spoke carefully, intent on the slim man's face. "It used to be a Torreon man could ride any place in Tucum Valley and step down welcome, Barney, but now all of a sudden he's treated like a grizzly in camp! It all began about a year ago . . . A Mex sheep herder named Flores, leaves his flock to scatter to hell and gone and no one ever hears from him again. No sign of him any place—and no one can find a fresh grave in the hills. He was a Torreon man, but everybody liked him. And about the same time Zeke Dooley begins acting like he's God Almighty in the valley. Why?"

"No one knows this Zeke Dooley? And the valley people fear him?"

Juno searched his questioner's face obliquely, remembering Barney's meeting tonight with Zeke, but found nothing. The slim man was not going to reveal a part of himself.

Juno answered drily, "They listen to him. I've never seen him wearing a gun."

"Anything else?"

Juno had to grin in quick amusement at the casual question. "Well, a gent who has thrown up a shack on Olla Creek across from Zeke's outfit is just squatting there on Torreon land to throw back any of Zeke's stock that wanders over—so he says."

"What about the owner of Torreon?"

Juno looked at him quickly, wondering if he could have guessed that the girl riding with them tonight was the owner of Torreon. Celsa had been standing behind them while they had been talking, but never once had Barney pretended to notice her. He had ignored her with the same cool indifference he had shown her crew. She moved up beside Juno.

"I am Celsa Torreon." Even she realized the imperious sound of her own voice, the arrogance of her pronouncement. And knew she had resented having had to stand aside while they had talked of the one thing in the world which concerned her most.

Barney removed his broad black hat, and with his light, sun-bleached hair he suddenly appeared surprisingly young. His thin face with its finely molded features was passive, yet somehow alert. His opaque gray eyes regarded her steadily.

"Do you always ride with your men, ma'am?" he asked politely, coolly.

"Not always—but I ride if I want to," she told him with a defensive lift of her chin, her black eyes beginning to gleam.

Juno looked on with a quickened interest, instantly aware of the antagonism springing up between the two. He smothered a grin at the look on Celsa's face as he recognized the initial symptom of her high temper.

"Do you want me to take the road to Torreon?" Barney asked her next, in the same tone.

Celsa struggled with her ruffled feelings and finally looked puzzled as to his meaning. It was a moment before she could answer, matching his cool tone.

"Yes."

"All right. But I will tell you this only once. If you ride with me, you will ride behind me. I don't intend to ride behind a petticoat." His voice was impersonal. "Now, do you still want me at Torreon?"

THE expressive face of Torreon's lovely owner slowly colored, and small gold flecks shone bright in her dark eyes. She understood only too well the implication behind his blunt words. He was telling her he disliked riding for a woman and he wanted that to be plain. And if he did ride for her he wanted it understood he was going to give the orders. She was warmly conscious of her men who had followed into the hills and now were watching this scene with lively interest. Only the name "Torreon" steadied her, working its spell as it always did and meaning too much to her, for her to let go of her poise in a rage.

"Yes," she answered him simply.

Juno admired her more than he ever had then, knowing how much it cost her stiff pride to speak that one soft word. The little devil was probably gritting her teeth with the effort it cost her. And because he knew her so well he felt a little sympathy for her and broke in. He turned away from the valley, his long arm gesturing toward the land ahead of them.

"This is all Torreon land," he said with pride.

Barney turned and looked over the miles and miles of Torreon land—land of forest green mountains, land of rust-colored canyons, land of juniper-spotted desert, land of green valleys with mountain-fed streams. All within his view.

"It was a Spanish land grant to old Don Carlos Manuel Torreon," Juno explained. "The whole territory knew him. He gave small land grants to families in return for guarding his several hundred thousand flocks of sheep and herds of cattle from unfriendly Indians. There's a settlement built by these people on Torreon land. The old don knew how to hold his land," Juno ended proudly.

"I will hold it, too!" Celsa declared, with a certain arrogance. "And I will make it what it was when Don Carlos lived. It will be worth any price I have to pay!"

Or the price of any man's life who rides beside you? Juno wondered soberly. And he thought, he was going to find out about that before this thing was finished. He was going to learn the full price she was willing to pay to hold her heritage. She had made a beginning. His dark eyes turned to the slim quiet man standing beside her. She had brought in a gunfighter. . . .

They rode the long way home from Tucum. Celsa had always loved this trail with its first sight of the Torreon house. Passing through a narrow valley preceding the high mountain range, they were almost there when Juno called to Barney.

"That's Torreon House against the mountain," he said. "They've tried to keep it much the same as it was when the old don built it."

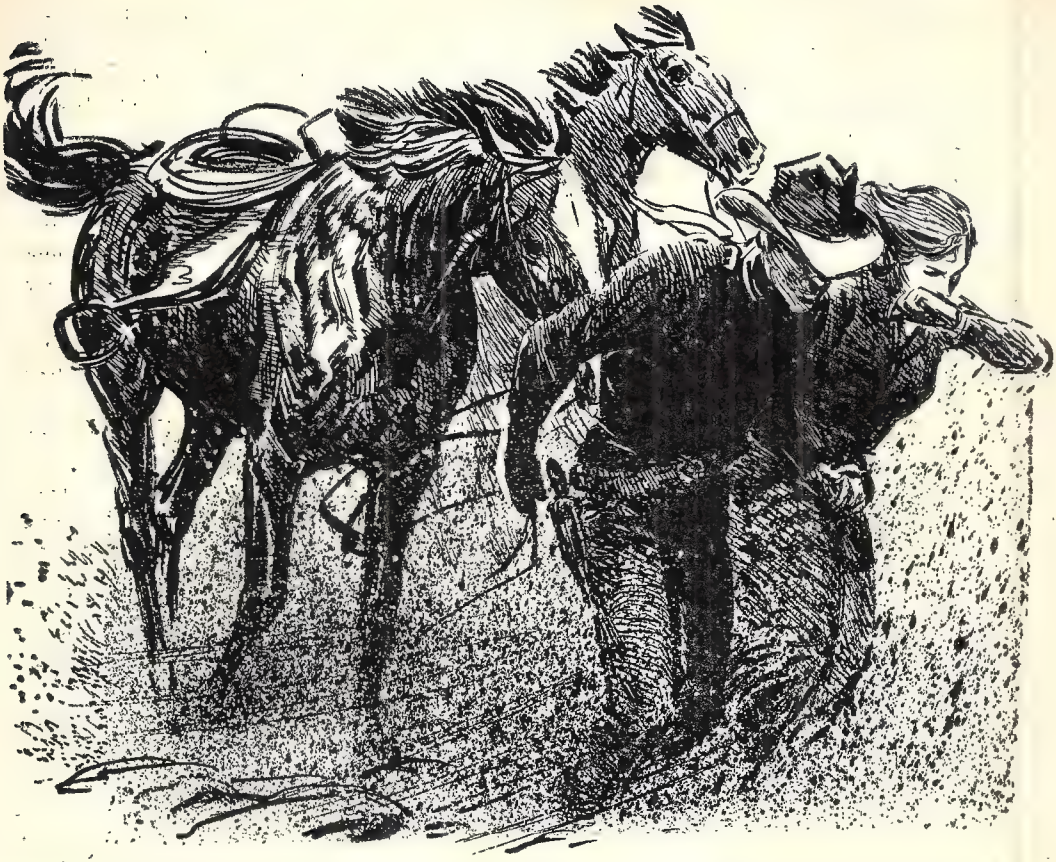
Torreon House was long and low, with thick adobe walls on a stone foundation. It was like a white fortress against the side of the green mountain. The outbuildings housing the servants and storerooms were built to the rear and the house seemed to stand alone in a wilderness. A low loose stone wall encircled the front yard.

As they rode up in the yard a boy they called Bunny came running to meet them. His white teeth gleamed in his thin, dark-skinned face. He was not yet a man, yet no longer a boy, with all the aggravating careless grace of one caught in between. His levis pulled tight and skimpy on his long legs, his clean faded shirt was snug across his bony shoulders. And the shabby shoes on his big growing feet were never still.

"I'll take your horse, señorita." His voice reached high and eager, while his eyes fastened on Barney Ripple.

"Good man, Señor Bunny," Juno said, with a solemn wink.

Bunny stifled a quick snorting laugh at Juno's exaggerated accent, wanting to be serious in this moment. After all, had not a famous gunfighter come to Torreon? The boy was completely absorbed in the slim



She wondered if they were doomed to struggle forever through this sand-blinding darkness

man's easy grace and amazing soft voice. Everyone on the ranch knew from that first moment of meeting that Bunny instantly had become Barney's admiring disciple.

CELSA slipped down from her horse with a smile for the boy. But when she turned to Barney, the smile was gone, her light voice was impersonal. She was, she thought, learning from his own cool way. "I will see you at dinner," she told him. "At seven."

"And the paper you have for me?" His soft question was intended only for her.

"The governor has signed your pardon," she answered quietly. "I will give it to you tonight."

"Fair enough."

She stared at him for a moment longer, searching his slim brown face and meeting his blank smooth look before she turned into the house. She did not understand him. It was almost as if she kept watching him for some expression of appraisal or a certain capitulation that never happened. He looked at her and through her without being in the least aware of her. She was only the means to a pardon signed by the governor. And, she told herself impatiently, that was the way she wanted it. What did she expect?

Barney followed Juno into the house. They passed through the long cool sala with its white plastered walls and low beamed ceiling. The thick Brussels carpeting muffled the sound of their boot heels as they crossed the room. Barney had only a fleeting impression of maroon velvet at the long narrow windows and of heavy carved furniture. Above the huge stone fireplace at the other end of the room hung a portrait of a noble Spanish gentleman. He didn't need anyone to tell him it

was old Don Carlos Manuel Torreon. Not even all that velvet and lace could conceal the Spanish don's proud spirit, and his piercing dark eyes seemed to penetrate down the length of the room searching out the stranger. The fine furnishings in this room were evidence of the wealth he had brought from Spain.

Juno led him across the patio that was enclosed by the house. A giant cottonwood tree growing in the center spread huge branches to make cool shade.

Juno said, opening a door leading off the patio, "We're putting you in here instead of the bunkhouse." He grinned, entirely friendly. "We're not expectin' any trouble from the boys—but we don't want one of them to get sudden brave."

When Barney only nodded indifferently, Juno closed the door. He was not surprised to hear Celsa call him from across the patio.

"Juno," she asked strangely, "is he the same man you remember?"

Juno nodded slowly. "I only met him once."

"I know," Celsa broke in impatiently. "You helped him ride out of that little Texas town alive."

"Yeah. And still don't know nothin' about him—no more than you do."

"I know something about him!" Celsa turned on him quickly, lifting her chin in a flare of temper. But even as she glared at him, her mood changed, becoming impatiently affectionate. She realized it was to Juno she could turn and speak her innermost thoughts and even if she didn't always have his sympathy, she had his understanding. Most of the time he seemed only amused at her actions. She went on lightly, "That Pinkerton man investigated him thoroughly. After all, he does come from a fine old Southern family."

"Yeah. And rode West after he shot the man he found in his sweetheart's bedroom," Juno interrupted drily. "On the eve of their wedding."

She stared at him, not even thinking of him, her face dark and tense. "I know. And his family disinherited him—beginning his life out here with a gun in his hand."

"Well, they made it possible for you to use him," Juno suggested, with a sly understanding of her thoughts.

"I will!"

And she left Juno standing there staring after her with bright interest. And, he added silently, "You are going to play a little hell in this valley, girl."

III

IT WAS almost seven when Celsa paused in the wide doors leading into the sala. Barney Ripple was standing beside the fireplace. There was a quiet, guarded look about him even as he stood at ease, listening to Juno.

Unobserved she stared at his dark, taciturn face as if wanting to understand him. There seemed to be no inner light behind his slate-gray eyes. No sign of feeling. Noting his fine broadcloth suit and pleated white shirt she was reminded of his fine family origin by his easy manner in wearing them. Her eyes clung in fascination to his hands, to the pale smoothness and to the long, slim fingers with their tapering grace.

He turned at the whispering sound of her dress as she moved. His eyes met hers before they swept down to slowly follow the outline of her black dress. A deceptively plain black dress with a low round neckline revealing each separate beginning of the small perfectly shaped breasts. The soft velvet clung to her small waist and the round curve of her hips before it swirled in a full skirt. She had let her black cloud of hair fall loose around her shoulders, the dull gleam accenting her fair skin. She felt her heart beat fast in the tiny pulse in her throat under his look. But when he turned away with a utter lack of interest it was maddening the way the warm color swept up into her face.

"You are beautiful tonight, Celsa," Juno drawled, with a grin, as he looked between them. His tone seemed to imply that at least he had noticed her.

Celsa reproved him with a quick darting glance. She spoke with quiet dignity. "Shall we go in to dinner?"

She could not help but be conscious of herself as she walked between them. A dark delicate girl, so completely feminine down to the embroidered satin slippers. And as con-

scious of the slim figure of Barney Ripple walking beside her, his coat sleeve touching her bare arm.

She was grateful for the presence of Juno during this dinner. He talked in his usual bantering fashion, seeming to ignore the constraint at the table, yet the mocking light in his eyes frequently touched Celsa.

She was unusually silent, idly turning her wine glass, unable to feel or act natural. When she glanced across the gold-leafed candelabrum and met Barney's eyes their glances seemed to cling in odd concentration before she lowered her eyes. She wondered in confusion if she had only imagined that brief alert look of curious interest.

"I expect all of Torreon will come to the fandango tonight," Juno was saying.

She looked up at him quickly, not knowing what he had been talking about. She saw his secret amusement and told herself with irritation that she might have known he was much too observant to miss anything passing between his silent dinner partners.

"I think they will come," she answered coolly enough.

"Company?" Barney asked, looking up from his cigarette.

"Open house at Torreon—like in the old days," Juno explained. "The people of Torreon are invited to meet the new boss."

Celsa stole a quick look at Barney and saw his slight cynical smile. What was he thinking? she wondered uneasily. She resented having to explain herself.

"They enjoy coming to this house," she said, a little too casually. "They come only when I invite them."

"Naturally. Only the mistress of Torreon invites her people to come," he answered with smooth politeness.

She stood up abruptly with a proud lift of her chin. Both men stood instantly, watching her. She recognized Juno's gleeful expectant look as he waited for her quick temper to explode. Barney was alert, waiting.

SHE held herself rigid with effort, her hands suddenly small fists. She would not give them the satisfaction of seeing her fighting mad! She would not! She walked over to the huge carved chest under the window and brought out a single scroll of paper and held it toward Barney.

"I will pay you now, Barney Ripple," she said, pleased at her own quiet voice. Damn Juno for his perverted sense of humor! And damn a man who didn't care if he hurt you! She went on, "Your pardon—signed by the Governor."

Barney took the paper with a slow movement. He stared down at it with sober intensity, his face smooth. She did not know what he was thinking, for there was no understanding him. Was he looking down the trail that had led to this night? Did he notice that she did not ask why he had a price on his head? He looked up, catching her absorbed expression and his face was purposely blank.

"Do you want me to sign anything?" he asked coldly.

"No. Just give me your word you will help settle the trouble here in the valley."

"You have it."

"Fair enough." She mimicked his words of earlier in the day and let him make what he would of the bright gleam of triumph in her eyes.

"Let's drink to the new boss," Juno drawled, watching them.

"No," Barney said softly, "we will drink to Torreon."

Both turned to search his thin brown face. Was he mocking them? They could not tell. There was a complete silence in the room as they lifted their glasses to drink the toast.

It was later when Celsa walked around the patio unable to quiet her tumbling thoughts for sleep. The evening just past was too vivid an impression in her mind for her to rest.

It had been open house at Torreon—as in the old days. There had been lively violin music for dancing in the long sala, the colorful dresses of the women blending brightly against the silk scarfs and shirts worn by the men.

She could smile a little now as she remembered Bunny's supreme air of importance as he had played the banjo during supper, his wide smile radiant. He had not missed anything during the evening, darting in every direction with loping quickness.

She knew her people had talked of Barney Ripple with awed curiosity. His soft voice had been polite, but lacking in any real friendliness. She had wondered silently if he was always to remain a mystery to these people—and to her.

She had been reluctant to dance with him. She was angry again to think of the sudden importance the moment had assumed to her. She had laughingly refused while her people had insisted she lead the dance with the new head of Torreon. She had tried to relent gracefully when she had caught his look of slight amusement. She flushed now to think how ironically amused he had been by her girlish behavior.

In the dance, she had been entirely aware of his slim hard body touching her briefly. Her hand had felt suddenly cold in his and she had refused to meet the close gray eyes.

Only one man had come from Tucum Valley—Sheriff Bill Benson. He had walked in calmly and accepted her glass of wine with a small awkward bow. She had smiled at him as she had spoken with light gracious words of welcome. When he left she had given him her hand, unconsciously playing up to his shy look of admiration. It was only after she met the gray irony of Barney's eyes that she had inwardly squirmed, doubting her own sincerity.

She had heard a little of the sheriff's conversation with Juno in the patio. And it had been enough to rouse her curiosity, brief and casual as it had seemed.

"I wonder if Barney Ripple ever learned what happened to that sheriff in Bullitt County?" Sheriff Benson had asked Juno almost abstractedly. Celsa had not been deceived by his manner. This was only his way of telling Juno he knew Barney was an outlaw.

"I dunno," Juno had answered lazily. And had added his indifferent afterthought, "Ripple received his pardon signed by the Governor tonight."

Sheriff Benson had nodded briefly. "I'm glad to know it."

AND there had been no way of knowing if he spoke the truth or not. But he would carry this news back to the valley.

The long evening had seemed interminable, filled with strange brief high-lighted moments. Certainly Catalina Gomez had enjoyed it! Her bright red skirt had swirled through the dancing, changing partners every few steps. Her face becomingly pink and laughing because of the constant attention she was receiving. She had even coaxed Juno to dance with her, teasing him until his dark ugly face had been grinning back in deviltry.

"You like me tonight, no?" Lina had teased, laughing happily.

"I sure do!" Juno had groaned and pulled her close to dance. Lina's soft hand had pressed against the back of his neck and he had jerked his head up to stare at her. She had demurely refused to meet his eyes.

And Celsa wondered if Juno was only beginning to realize that Lina was in love with him. That none of the attention of the other men interested her except as a compliment Juno might one day notice. Not even Jack Solano. And he was handsome with his bright silk scarf and fancy shirt. His slim hips tapered gracefully down to slim, pointed high-heeled boots. His expressive eyes and rather sensual mouth were usually successful with women—and he knew it. But not with Lina. She had laughed at his attempts at seriousness and mocked his vanity. She had deliberately turned from his arms tonight to dance with Barney. Not caring what it did to Jack's conceit or pride. And not knowing she was causing Barney to make his first enemy at Torreon.

"I've always wanted to dance with a Southerner," Lina had declared, laughing over Jack's shoulder.

Barney had smiled faintly. "My pleasure to oblige a lady," he'd said, with his first show of gallantry.

Lina had started quickly toward him before Jack caught her by the wrist. His smile had been forced and angry. "It is still our dance, Lina," he'd protested.

"Not if the lady says no." Barney's low drawl had been silky.

Jack had stared at him with smoldering eyes and with a jealous hatred rising in him. As if a sudden secret thought had struck him he turned on his heels, swinging toward the door.

Fingers, who had watched with amusement, muttered slyly to the men around him, "I always thought a man from the South moved slow." The others laughed. Jack turned on him quickly.

"I'll take nothin' from you, Handsome," he'd said in a ugly temper.

Fingers' face had turned brilliant with suppressed anger as he'd glared back. He turned away unsteadily, unwilling to cause a scene. Jack knew his particular touchiness, and his lip curled as he saw Fingers' stiff back. None of the men spoke and the old fellow left the room.

Celsa who had listened and watched him had turned and seen Lina close to Barney, smiling up in his face. Even Barney seemed to notice her soft prettiness. Celsa had moved away, telling herself she resented Lina's precipitating trouble among her men. And a small insistent voice had asked if she didn't also resent Lina in Barney's arms. She'd bumped squarely into Juno and his quick grin had told her he had been watching and probably understood her thoughts.

"Sacred infant, Juno!" Celsa had exploded loudly. "You plague me like a second conscience!"

She'd bit her lip as Juno shouted his quick laughter. It was not often he could completely ruffle her proud composure. Her black brows almost met as she scowled at him.

It was late now, and the house was dark and quiet. She turned as she heard the door close off the patio. Barney was leaving his room, again dressed in levis and soft blue shirt. He wore a gun low on his hip.

"You aren't going out tonight?" She moved toward him, speaking softly in fear of waking Maria. Old Maria had been her servant since the day she had been born. Por Dios! She was a strict tyrant!

BARNEY had already found her and walked toward the bench. The moonlight was bright against her pale skin, while her black dress blended into the shadows. He stopped short.

"I'm going to ride over Torreon," he announced.

"But—" She didn't know how to continue, afraid to interfere. He waited silently, watching her as she groped for words. "If someone sees you riding on your first night here, they might think you're hunting trouble."

"Does it matter now?"

He didn't care what anyone thought—it simply didn't matter. She turned willful. He would *have* to care if he was to help her. This had to go right. It meant too much for any slip-up to occur.

"It does to me," she declared defiantly. "My people look to Torreon for a certain standard of behavior. They approve of my hiring a man to help me hold my land—but not a man deliberately hunting trouble."

"You uphold the tradition," he told her quietly. "I'll take care of the trouble."

"I think it would be better to wait until morning."

"I thought I made it plain, ma'am, that if I stay I am to head this outfit."

"I understood. I only suggested waiting." Her words were stiff with pride. "My men usually listen to me."

"I reckon they do."

"You don't believe me?" She asked, puzzled. There was something in his voice she couldn't analyze, but instinctively resented.

"I believe you." His glance flickered over her. "A woman usually has a way of making a man do as she wants."

"You mean I persuade my men—unfairly?"

"I reckon you do. It isn't unusual for a woman to use her—natural charms as a persuasive." He added bluntly, "It usually works, too."

"You dare say this to me?" Her voice was husky with suppressed anger. She was suddenly trembling, her pale face gleaming in the moonlight.

"Who are you that a man can't speak his mind to? The princess in the tower?" He spoke carelessly.

"Sacred infant!" she shouted, no longer caring who heard her. She moved toward him quickly, wanting to hurt him, to break through his cold mask. She raised her hand to strike out at him, her dark eyes brilliant in her pale face. He caught her hands in a swift strong grip.

"No—no."

She struggled in a futile effort to free herself, her slim body trembling. His hard bronze face was close to hers, his gray eyes alert. Suddenly she relaxed, the events of the day crowding her too far. Her taut body went limp, swaying gently toward him.

He responded automatically, his hands catching her around the waist. Her confused senses were aware only of his closeness, his hard bright eyes. He pulled her against him roughly, her slim softness yielding against his stiff body. His hand was rough under her chin, his breath warm on her face . . . And she waited.

"What do you want of me, Celsa?"

Her eyes flew open at his low, controlled words. For a moment she was so dazed she could only stare up at him.

He went on, "Do you want a lover—or a gunfighter?"

She stepped back, turning rigid with the cold wave of anger sweeping through her. Her eyes were dangerous and her full soft mouth trembled as she whispered:

"You will pay for this—gunfighter!"

"I reckon. But I don't intend to become another conquest for the mistress of Torreon."

She whirled and ran in her bedroom, slamming her door with all the violence of her outraged pride. She was suddenly weak and sick as she thought of his words. No man had ever dared to speak to her like that. He had held her in his arms and pushed her aside with open contempt. She clenched her fists as she thought that this was how a cheap woman must feel when refused! And she was taunted by the memory of the moment she had relaxed in his arms. He must have been aware of the wild beating of her heart and felt the trembling in her body. Tears ran down her face as she swore aloud that he would pay for this night! In this moment of wildness she would have paid the price of Torreon to get even!

IV

WHEN Barney Ripple left his bedroom, it was sunup. Juno was walking restlessly around the patio waiting for him. Juno was not a man to sit patiently idle waiting for the day to begin. When he opened his eyes on daylight he began moving with his restless spirit.

"I'll want to ride boundaries," Barney was beginning to say, when Celsa opened her door.

Juno looked at her curiously. Her chin was tilted with a stubborn look while soft color spread over her face under Barney's smooth hard look. He wondered with secret amusement what had happened between them. There was never to be any ordinary meeting between these two. Perhaps they were too much alike.

"I want to say one thing, Barney," she began without any polite preliminaries.

She walked toward them, boyishly feminine in her dark riding suit. Her white shirt was open, revealing the slim line of her throat. Juno wondered if Barney ever noticed the dark, delicate beauty in that oval face—he never saw him change before her as other men did. As he knew he did. He was constantly aware of her. He started to leave now, murmuring an excuse, but Celsa stopped him.

"Wait, Juno, I want you to hear this, too," she said without turning from Barney, her dark eyes refusing to remember the night before. "In our bargain I said if you'd give Torreon your infamous name I'd see that the governor signed your pardon. And yesterday I agreed you were to head this outfit. I want to make only one stipulation. I want this trouble in the valley settled without another Lincoln County War, if possible. I think many men will fear you and your gun and will hesitate about riding against Torreon. I don't want you to use your—skill—unless you have to. Do you know what I'm trying to tell you?"

That busted it, Juno groaned silently. She knew as well as anyone in the Territory the difference between a known gunfighter and a crazy gunman. She was deliberately stinging him with words. Still a disturbing inner voice whispered that perhaps she was right in reminding this slim man that there was only a pale line between the two, and that often it didn't take much to push a man over that line.

"Yes, ma'am." Barney's face was in-

scrutable, his words slurring together. "I rarely kill a man for fun. I usually wait for provocation."

Their eyes clashed in open antagonism. Juno watched this silent battle of wills, unable to guess the reason or the outcome.

"I want to ride with you today—behind you," Celsa said finally, a slight yielding in her voice.

"Pack grub for a few days," Barney answered her. "After we ride boundaries we'll scout around Tucum Valley."

He might have been speaking of a casual hunting trip in the hills, Juno thought wryly. He followed him out of the house and watched him cross the yard with his light step, nodding briefly to a few of the men down by the corral, his brown face disinterested.

It was Bunny, walking with loping eagerness toward the gunfighter who broke through his cold consciousness. Bunny watched silently while Barney whistled at his black which had been turned loose in the corral. The big horse trotted up with lively intelligence.

Bunny didn't speak while Barney saddled up, only waited hopefully for the slightest sign of recognition. He stood with his long arms hanging limply, not even trying to assume a pose of nonchalance.

Barney looked up, catching the full light of that admiration in the round black eyes. He turned back to tighten his cinch, but the hard set of his face had relaxed a little.

"Saddle up, Bunny," Barney said surprisingly. "I'll need another man."

Bunny hurried off at a galloping run, tripping over his own long legs. The look on his face was beatific. Juno caught Fingers' eye and winked solemnly. Fingers snorted as he stamped away. Juno grinned at his retreating back and began whistling as he saddled his horse. He was suddenly pleased with the morning. And why, he asked himself with wry humor, was he pleased to find softness in the man who might lead them in a fight?

IT WAS late afternoon before they passed through Red Dust country. In some places the jagged brick-colored canyon walls slanted straight upward, with slim passage for a man on horseback in the gully trail between. When they had passed through the canyon they were stretching toward the desert, with stunted juniper and rabbit brush dotting the land.

They made camp that night with an old Mexican sheepherder, a thin, dwarflike figure, his back as bent as the stick he carried to lean on. Deep purple scars twisted the burned leather texture of his face and hands. Afterward, when Barney remembered the scars hadn't roused his curiosity, but instead he insisted that he had noticed only the old man's eyes—dark, deep-set, heavy-lidded eyes filled with the strangest look of peace. The old Mexican seemed only vaguely pleased with their company, speaking in a slow voice as if he had learned time had no real meaning out here. But he seemed to regard Celsa with special affection.

Bunny helped him gather greasewood for a fire. The old man heated frijoles and made coffee for their supper. Afterward he talked with Barney in his soft Spanish while they ate.

"I herd sheep on Torreon since I was a boy like this one," he said, indicating Bunny with one scar-twisted hand.

"Don't you ever get lonesome, Sancho?" Juno asked, turning with a restless movement around the fire.

Sancho looked at him, becoming vague again. "No, señor. I always know one day I must leave my herd and I wait." He glanced at Celsa with soft understanding eyes. "Doña Ana will inform me when my wife and little one come home—and I wait."

Barney quickly covered his start of surprise, refrained from looking toward Celsa as he lighted his cigarette.

"True," Juno answered, poking at the fire.

Celsa smiled up at the old man, the dark depths of her eyes reflected by the light of the fire. Sancho reached down and patted her hair gently before he turned back to Juno.

"It is a good thing to feel close to the sky here next to the desert," he said slowly. "And sleep next to the earth at night." He had noticed Juno's restlessness and offered

him this. He seemed to lose interest in conversation then, and moved aimlessly away from the fire. His slow dragging steps were a muffled sound in the sand. Minutes passed before they heard him murmuring affectionately to the sheep dogs in the distance.

"When is his family coming home?" Barney asked idly.

"They're not." Juno's voice was oddly abrupt as a change of feeling flickered across his face. "Sancho came home one day from the desert to find his little house burning to the ground, his wife and baby trapped inside. We found him searching the hot ashes and had to drag him away. Afterward he seemed to think his wife had taken the baby away on a visit. He used to walk up and down the streets of Tucum all day just waiting for the train, thinking she was coming home. Celsa finally persuaded him to come out here and wait. He thinks she's her mother. His mind slipped back somehow."

Barney understood now the look in the old man's eyes. The strange look of almost blank peace. The old man had built himself a protective life of dreams against terrible reality. He met Celsa's eyes across the camp fire and for a moment their glances clung with a searching intensity. He saw the bright shine of tears so close to the surface in her eyes before he turned away that he wondered if she expected him to comment on Sancho's story. But there was nothing to say. His story was ended.

He moved away from the light of the fire and rolled in his blanket. His gun was close to his hand. He did all this automatically and only sometimes wondered, when the black mood was on him, why he bothered to take these precautions any longer. And this was his mood tonight, filled with dark premonition.

THEY left early the next morning. Juno told the old Mexican he would send Bunny with fresh supplies in a few days. The old man never left the desert country. As they rode away Barney looked back once and saw the bent figure of Sancho in his long dusty coat slowly moving across the bare sand.

The sun was still up when they reached Olla Creek. Barney did not speak as he looked down at the clear running water. He knew the value of these mountain-fed streams over the land.

"Purty, ain't it?" Juno asked, with his own humor.

Barney only nodded and Juno went on, "Maybe that's why Zeke put his man in the cabin downcreek—to squat there and enjoy the scenery."

"Do you know him?"

"About all I know about him is his name —Chesley."

And, Barney reflected grimly, it was the same old pattern for range war. Planned accidents mounting to a growing tension until there was open hostility—with gunsmoke clouding each man's thoughts.

"We must be sociable," Barney said mildly. He saw the protest beginning in Celsa's eyes and her soft mouth close tightly. He answered the look on her face. "Just a little visit—nothing more."

"Let's ride," Juno answered, with a grin. The prospect of trouble was already lighting his face.

It was almost an hour before they reached the crude log shack partially hidden in a aspen thicket. It was a bold move on Torreon land, for there was even an air of permanence about the cabin. No one moved outside as they approached and Barney felt his first instinctive feeling of trouble. He rode warily, obeying his strong instinct.

Juno's horse shied nervously as they rode up in the yard, probably sensing his rider's uneasiness. Juno balanced in the saddle, carefully poised.

Barney dismounted a little distance from the cabin. His quiet "Wait" held Celsa and Bunny in their saddles. He made a wide sweep of his arm for Juno to circle back of the cabin.

Celsa's eyes widened as she watched him approach the cabin door with his light cat step, his arm slightly crooked above his gun. Juno was disappearing behind the cabin.

Barney stopped dead beside the door, waited for movement inside the cabin and knew suddenly with a kind of grim pessimism he wasn't going to hear any.

Juno reached the window and peered in just as Barney lifted his left hand and batted the door wide open. The door banged against the wall with a startling sharpness in the still afternoon. Juno opened his mouth to yell when he saw Chesley inside the door waiting motionless with his gun ready in his hand. And this was the moment when Juno learned how Barney had earned his name for being a fast gun. Later, when he tried to remember the shooting he had only a swift vision of Barney drawing and firing in the same instant. It was a trick only a few of the wild ones knew—drawing and firing without aiming. It was swifter than time—and deadlier. He watched with his mouth still open to yell his warning and hearing in the same instant the shocking report of the gun shot.

Barney stood motionless in the doorway while Chesley fell with grotesque slowness, to lie dead on the floor. Juno stood paralyzed by the window while his mind slowly grasped the fact that Chesley *was* dead. He swore once in a loud terrible voice and the sound of his own voice shook him. He raced around the cabin, dimly aware of Celsa and Bunny running up in the yard.

Barney hadn't moved and Juno pulled up beside him. He needed only one quick look at Chesley sprawled on the floor before he turned to Barney. The look on the gunfighter's face was strangely dark and impassive.

"Dead?" Juno asked succinctly.

Barney turned his head slowly, his gray eyes blank against the pale pallor of his sunbrowned face. He looked through Juno without answering him.

CELSA reached the door with Bunny pounding behind her. She caught her breath as she looked down at the dead man. His hard young face was already settling in a blank look of calm, despite the dark spot that spread only a little on his chest. Her eyes clung in morbid fascination and she didn't realize she made a soft moaning sound of despair.

Juno reached out his hand to touch her shoulder, but she jerked away as she whirled on Barney. Her black eyes glittered in her pale face.

"You—you gunfighting murderer!" Her voice was hoarse with the violent emotion shaking her.

Barney stared down at her from a smooth hard face. "Get Celsa out of here, Bunny," he said without expression.

Celsa was termbling as Bunny put his arms around her and led her outside. Her knees buckled under her and she sat down abruptly on the step. She stared across the yard as she tightened her mouth against her trembling lips.

Inside the cabin Juno did not look at Barney. He looked down at the still figure on the floor. It didn't matter how often he saw it happen here in the territory he still felt the same shock.

"He was Zeke's man," he said, and asked, wanting to break the silence in the room, "Do you think this was Zeke's plan?"

Barney moved, walking stiffly to the door. His voice hadn't changed; it was cool and steady. "I don't know. But I think we'll have to find the answer . . . because this is just what everyone in the valley expected of me, probably wanted."

"What the hell?" Juno asked roughly.

"They'll figure this gives them an excuse to do what they want to do," Barney explained quietly. "Maybe ride on Torreon."

Celsa listened with a desperate sick feeling. "I made a mistake—asking you to come," she said in a tired voice.

"Chesley had his gun ready to fire on

STRANGE TALE

"STRANGE Is My Name And I'm On Strange Ground And Strange It is I Can't Be Found." These words were carved on a beech tree in West Virginia in 1795 under which the bones of frontiersman William Strange were found after he'd become lost from a surveying party.

—Harold Helfer

Barney," Juno broke in with angry protest. "He was waiting for him in the cabin. I saw the whole thing!"

"She's probably right," Barney said. Only this dead man brings you a step closer to the answer of what happened to Flores."

"By God, you're right!" Juno's eyes blazed. "I was a dam' fool not to think of that. The man who planned this is the same man who got rid of Flores—maybe killed him."

Barney shrugged and Juno thought of something else.

"Let's get out of here while we can!"

"It's a little late," Barney said, his eyes narrowed on the trail downcreek.

Juno turned quickly and cursed expressively. Two men were approaching the cabin, their horses traveling leisurely. The men in the cabin waited. There was nothing else to do. Barney didn't look at Juno as he asked one final question.

"What about Sheriff Benson?"

"I don't know," Juno murmured. "His father was honest—but Bill's young yet.

Zeke Dooley and George Gunthrie rode up in the yard. Searching the big man's face, Barney had his bold answering stare. Zeke's pale eyes slipped around him to find Celsa with a bright quickening. Gunthrie sat solid in his saddle making no attempt to conceal his contempt for Barney.

"Chesley inside?" Zeke asked casually.

Barney wondered bleakly if he only hoped he read the sly amusement back of Zeke's words. He knew in this moment he wanted to believe Zeke knew he had shot Chesley. And when he realized how his thoughts were turning he knew their final meeting was inevitable.

"Yeah—dead." Juno drawled, just as casually.

BARNEY would have unwillingly sworn that Zeke's expression did not change a fraction. It was Gunthrie who started, flushing red. His was the unstable temper. He turned accusingly on Barney, careless of his hot flow of words.

"You didn't wait long, did you, gunfighter?" he blurted.

Barney watched him coldly. He was too old a hand, too experienced to let a damn fool provoke him into doing something rash. He let his hands swing loose and careless. Juno, though, must have been afraid of what was to come and stepped before Gunthrie, making it impossible for Barney to stand quietly.

"Chesley had his gun drawn when Barney stepped in the door—I saw the whole thing from the window," Juno explained with a disgusted look at Gunthrie. The rancher's wild temper was leading him down a strange trail.

Zeke swung down from his horse, his huge body towering over the other men. His big red head was bare in the sunlight. He glanced at Celsa before he walked past them with heavy assurance.

"I'll just have a look," he said calmly.

Gunthrie dismounted hurriedly, suspicious of everyone, and openly angry. He followed Zeke into the cabin, not wanting anything to escape him. He threw a darting glance at Barney over his shoulder as he passed.

Barney stared across the yard. His thoughts would have surprised the vigilant Gunthrie. He was thinking the peaceful sunlit scene by the creek was a mocking sacrilege considering there was a dead man in the cabin. Reminded a man of his own unimportance. The sun still shone and minutes went by. And the depression settling on his spirit was one he knew and dreaded. It was always the same, and had been since the first time he had ever used his gun on a man. He looked up. When he found Celsa watching him closely his face smoothed out.

Zeke came out of the cabin. His pale eyes swept over them. The still man on the floor inside had not touched him. Whatever his secret plans were, they were still driving him on beyond each moment. His big hands were steady on the cigarette he was making.

Gunthrie followed him out quickly, with his head down. Plainly he was reluctant to stay alone in the silent cabin. The sight of the dead man had shaken him. He was a rash man, with a hot temper, but he was not without human compassion.

Barney, watching him, unconsciously stored this thought away in his mind. It

was one of the odd stray thoughts and images that sometimes helped him.

"I'll tell the sheriff," Zeke said with his calm authority. "Or maybe you'd better ride along to town with us now, Ripple."

Barney shook his head gently, but his gray eyes were alert. "I'm not having any of that, Zeke. No man in the valley would let me ride out again. If the sheriff wants me tell him to come and get me at Torreon."

"You'd better come along," Gunthrie protested quickly. "The sheriff will have a few questions."

"Do you want to take me in, Gunthrie?" Barney asked mildly. He stared steadily at Gunthrie's flushed face. It was time now to take a stand.

Juno didn't speak or make a move. He could not step in this time, it had gone beyond where he could help. He only hoped the damn fool would read the warning in Barney's face and walk easy.

Gunthrie didn't speak for a moment while the deep color in his face mounted. It came to him finally that this outlaw gunfighter had called him, and all his usual garrulity left until he was suddenly feeling stupid.

"I did not mean I'd try to take you in," he said slowly, with a surprising dignity.

Juno felt a reluctant admiration for the hard-headed young cowman. He was not a complete fool—or he'd be dead.

Zeke looked amused as his bold eyes raked Gunthrie with open scorn. He spoke to Barney almost indifferently. "I stand by my words."

"I try to," Barney said softly. But he had changed. Reckless anger was now making him rash. He wanted to have it out with the big man, and Zeke must have seen that in his expression.

"Do you want to take me in, Zeke?" he asked.

Zeke shook his head, but his eyes were bright with promise. This wasn't finished, only beginning. He wasn't going to be pushed into anything. He had his own plans, and apparently he didn't care if they knew it.

"I'll wait," he promised slowly. "You'll ride into town one day, Ripple, with the Torreon crew behind you. I'll wait for the day."

He turned for one final look at Celsa, his eyes lingering on the tempting delicate face, on her breast moving with her quick breathing. That he wanted her was again plain in his face.

"You might still make this right, Celsa," he said almost gently, ignoring the others.

SHE shook her head, unable to look away from him. She made a slight movement as if to stand a little closer to Barney. Zeke's smartness caught the move and in this moment his hate for the slim gunman began.

"Gunthrie," Barney suggested, watching Zeke, "if you're smart, you'll take a good look at the man you're riding with."

Zeke shook his head with a slight smile, and swung up on his horse with heavy deliberation. He had made his plans and he wasn't going to change them.

Gunthrie mounted and turned back to look at Barney with a curiously baffled expression. Then he wheeled his horse and rode after Zeke.

It was Juno who broke the silence in the yard. "Big Zeke's not afraid—he's up to something. Maybe you know something about the big man, Ripple?"

Barney stared down the trail. "I do know something about him. His kind of people came out of the hills of Tennessee and moved around the west of Texas. A while tribe of them running away from the fight in the States. They tied everything they had together with a piece of rawhide and lived off the other man's beef. I ran into Zeke once in a little town down that way. The whole town tried to push us into a shoot-out, but Zeke laughed in their faces and bought me a drink. He thought it was funny."

V

SILENTLY agreed, they rode away from the cabin by the Olla. They followed the creek for several miles before dark came on and they made camp.

They ate their supper by the fire, the silence of the dark night broken only by the sound of the running creek. Afterward Juno stretched out lazily, speaking idly with Bun-

ny while he smoked his cigarette. Barney moved away, his light step inaudible as soon as he left the glow of the firelight.

Celsa moved aimlessly around the fire, refusing to meet the knowing interest in Juno's expression as he watched her. She tried to walk without purpose in the direction in which Barney had disappeared. And she knew with partly amused irritation that Juno had not been fooled for a minute.

Barney, standing by the creek, turned slightly as he heard her step.

"What comes next, Barney?" she asked hesitantly, remembering her bitter words to him in the cabin.

"It's pretty easy to guess," he answered quietly. "The valley men will strike back for Chesley—or Zeke will. From this day on every man on Torreon will be open game for Tucum Valley.

She pushed her hair back from her face in a weary gesture. Her voice was taut. "What am I going to have to pay to hold Torreon?"

"A lot more . . . Do you care, Celsa?"

"Do you have to ask me that? Don't you know I care?"

"When you brought me in you decided on the price you were willing to pay," he said coldly.

"I don't understand."

"I think you do. The day you brought in a gunfighter you must have known that hell rode in with me."

"It began before you came!"

"Some of it. Only a beginning of the real thing. From now on my name and Zeke's dead man will alibi any violence that happens in the valley. It will all be thrown in the lap of Torreon. You hired a gun—and he killed a man. They can use the same weapon. You were right today when you said you made a mistake in asking me to come." He moved away from her restlessly.

She moved toward him quickly, her hand warm and soft on his arm. She was close, her clean delicate fragrance reaching him in the dark. "Do you honestly think if you left that would stop Zeke? There's no stopping him! You can't leave: I need you!"

"That's your answer."

He did not move away from her hand, but stood looking down at her. She couldn't see the dark expression on his face, but his tone told her it was there. "You don't have to practice your wiles on me, Celsa. I can guess how soft and warm those lips of yours would be to kiss—and how you'd feel pressed against me. But you've already paid me. Remember?"

She felt her face burn with swift, hot anger. She wanted to shout her anger or to kill him. Instead, she spoke in a sweet tantalizing whisper.

"Can you guess, gunfighter? Can you?"

For a moment she thought she had won and finally broken through his iron reserve. She felt him stiffen under her hand and saw the quick jerk of his head as he bent toward her. He was going to grab her and she'd laugh in his face! His next words were almost a blow.

"Isn't it enough that every man on Torreon is willing to die for you? Why do you want me to?"

She couldn't control her temper now. It was a warm fire running through her. She barely remembered Juno and his keen curiosity in time to control the words she spoke through gritted teeth.

"I don't want you! I hate a gunfighter!" She barely breathed. It wasn't enough. She had to hurt him. "You keep accusing me of trying to use you and my men unfairly. Perhaps I am. I'm fighting for something that belongs to me—Torreon! Why are you willing to throw your life away? For a pardon signed by the Governor? I don't think so. You don't care what happens to you now. You resent me because I care about something—my land!"

"You will keep Torreon, Celsa. I'll see to that—even if I don't give a damn!" His words were as hard as stone.

SHE stared at him for a moment longer before she turned away and stumbled back to camp. She wiped hot tears away angrily. The low violence in his words stayed with her and seemed to fill the silence of the night.

Bunny was asleep in his blanket close to the fire. Juno was idly whittling at a stick. He glanced up at her briefly before he looked

back at the fire. When he spoke his voice was casually kind and seemed to carry his own warning.

"He rides alone . . . . Make no mistake about that, honey."

She turned on him furiously. "I don't care if he rides to the devil! Do you understand that?"

"Sure."

She flung herself down on her blanket and turned her back to him without speaking again. She told herself that Juno thought he knew her too well. And it was strange that she dreamed of a slim gray-eyed man watching her silently.

It was gray daylight when Celsa woke, to see Juno stirring up the fire. Barney was a shadowy silhouette saddling the horses. She tried to smooth her tumbled hair, feeling tired and cross. Her steps were stiff as she walked down to the creek and washed her face and hands. The water was icy cold and left her shivering in the early morning air.

Juno watched her hurry back to the fire with a malicious grin. I reckon about this time you're wishing for Maria and the comforts of home," he drawled in amusement.

Celsa made a face at him as she accepted the tin cup of coffee he offered her. "I must confess the wild life is not for me," she said. "I slept on rocks and I was cold."

She heard Barney's light step as he came up to the fire and knew he'd heard her peevish remarks. His smooth face seemed to remind her he hadn't wanted or asked her to come along on this trip.

He turned toward Juno as he politely waited for her to finish. And his masculine indifference irritated her more.

"I want you to ride with me to the mountain pass camp you were talking about last night, Juno. Every man on Torreon should be warned that the valley men may ride our way," he said quietly. He turned to Celsa and Bunny. "You will ride back to the main house. Tell Fingers to send out a man to every line camp and herder and tell them to keep a man on watch for trouble."

Celsa turned pale as she listened. This was the kind of trouble he knew. It was a part of his life, and his knowledge gave him a kind of grim immunity against shock or fear. He did not really care—and she could not stop thinking about him. She turned and ran for her horse and spurred toward Torreon.

Bunny had started after her when Barney stopped him.

"Miss Celsa is not to ride alone—day or night," he told the boy with steady emphasis.

Bunny nodded seriously, looking suddenly older as he accepted his responsibility. He understood. He had seen the red-headed Zeke look at Celsa. He mounted his horse and galloped after her.

The mountain pass camp was a lonely one. High above the cattle grazing in a small green valley below. Torreon kept several men constantly at this station. Most of the men disliked their turn at this lonely camp. It was too far to ride to the bright lights of town for the main reason. Most of the evenings were spent in playing cards, money changing hands so frequently that it usually ended up in the pocket of its origin.

As visitors from Torreon rode up in the clearing, a waddy named Clip Hanley stepped from the cabin. He was carrying a rifle and held it slightly raised. Juno exchanged a quick puzzled look with Barney. The boys at the pass camp didn't usually walk around this isolated spot armed with rifles. They knew something had happened even before they heard Clip's excited voice.

RECOGNIZING Juno, Clip carefully set his rifle down beside the cabin door. He was deliberately prolonging the moment before he faced them. He realized that the man riding with Juno must be Barney Ripple. And, he thought grimly, there was going to be hell to pay when he told them what had happened. He felt hot and ashamed, but he was determined to tell all of it. His sun-burned young face was flushed as he met them.

"How did you hear about the stolen beef?" he demanded.

"Stolen beef?" Juno echoed dumbly.

"Ain't that why you're here?" Clip asked quickly. Oh Lordy, they hadn't heard yet! And he had to be the one left behind to tell Juno. And in front of this hard-faced quiet

man. He blurted out the rest of it.

"Somebody rode into the valley last night and rode herd on at least five hundred head!"

It took Juno a few minutes to grasp Clip's information. And it came to him with a beginning of anger. Barney sat impassively in his saddle, not speaking.

"What were you boys doing?" Juno asked as calmly as he could.

"Well, you see Jack Solano brought a bottle up from town and we was playing cards and drinking," Clip forced himself to tell. His face was fiery red now and he was twisting his toes in his boots with embarrassment. "Honest to God, Juno, we never heard a thing!"

"Of all the dam' fool—" Juno began disgustedly.

"Wait," Barney interrupted quietly, "where's the rest of the crew now?"

"They rode out early this mornin' to see if they could pick up a trail in the mountain pass," Clip's voice almost dwindled away as he hurried through the explanation. He was wondering if Barney knew how hard it was to track cattle through the mountain pass. It was almost impossible to read any sign in the deep bed of pine needles constantly falling and covering the trail. Juno knew. Clip stole a quick look at him and saw the irony in his expression. He tried to avoid the ramrod's accusing dark eyes.

"They'll be back?" Barney asked.

"They ought to be back before night," Clip answered eagerly, only too anxious to help.

"If not sooner," Juno added, with heavy sarcasm.

Clip squirmed under his derisive manner, but Barney ignored Juno. The waddy had already been punished and spanked in his own mind and it would probably be a long time before he fell down on his job again.

"You wait here," Barney told him. "When the boys return tell them that the men in the valley are playing wild. The pilgrim in the cabin on the Olla pulled his gun on me yesterday."

Vivid curiosity shone bright in Clip's eyes as he looked up at Barney. But he swallowed all the questions he might have asked and tried to look unconcerned. He asked only, "He did?"

"He's dead," Barney answered quietly. "But from now on every man on Torreon will have to ride careful."

Clip's face was a study in racing thoughts. He was visualizing the action in the cabin by the Olla and at the same time trying to grasp Barney's warning. His face finally settled in steady resolution.

"I'll be here," he said, "and I'll tell the boys."

"We'll send a few more boys up here—you may need them," Barney told him, and without giving further orders wheeled his horse back down trail.

Juno sat still a moment watching the expression on Clip's face as Clip stared after the slim man. It was the same way Bunny looked at Barney. What was it—plain admiration? And something else?

Clip looked up at him and his jaw set as he waited for Juno to give him hell about last night. Well, he had it coming. Juno surprised him by grinning down at him amiably.

As he turned his horse and rode after Barney, he found himself watching the slim man in the saddle in front of him. He grinned in sudden amusement. And me, too, he thought.

Barney reined in to speak to him. "Find the short cut home, Juno. I've got a feeling—"

"What do you think has happened?"

Barney shook his head as he answered, "I don't know. But you remember what Zeke said about pulling me into Tucum?"

"You're riding in?" Juno asked quickly, thinking of the stolen cattle.

"Not yet," Barney said slowly. "That's what the big fellow wants. He's not going to stop until he does draw us in, either. It's an old trick, hitting in seven different directions at the same time."

VI

BARNEY'S premonition of more trouble stayed with him even when he rode up in the quiet yard of Torreon. Things were happening too fast—the trouble was reaching a point where the end was inevitable. And

it would be a long time before there would again be peace in the valley.

Fingers met them at the corral. The sun glistened on his bald head and his toothless mouth was puckered in a sober line. Juno almost grinned at the sight of him, despite his own mounting tension.

been pacing restlessly around the courtyard. And Catalina was with her. She was not even aware of the expression on her face as she looked at Juno.

Barney was watching Celsa. "What is it?" he asked.

"Bunny rode out early this morning with

"Smile when you say that, pardner!"

"Miss Celsa's been waiting for you in the patio," the old man said, with a dark reproving look as if they had deliberately kept Celsa waiting.

"We'll sashay right on in," Juno said, with mocking seriousness.

"Do," Fingers grunted.

Celsa was waiting in the patio. She had

supplies for Sancho," Celsa said, feeling relief in just telling it. Then she saw Barney's face and knew she wasn't going to find any reassurance. She had been justified in wanting to ride after the boy! "He left early without telling me. He always takes out Sancho's supplies. He is in danger, isn't he? I keep worrying about him."

"Yes," Barney said shortly. "Mountain pass camp was rustled night before last. I've a hunch the fun is only beginning. I'm riding after the boy."

Celsa ran after him. "I'm going with you!"

Barney stopped. He wanted to refuse to let her ride, but the look on her face was one he was beginning to wait for and recognize. He saw the stubborn set of her jaw and the bright determination in her eyes. She would ride with him—or follow him.

"There may be trouble," he said, knowing that wouldn't stop her.

Her eyes flashed in scorn. She wasn't afraid of being hurt. She was already putting on her jacket and reaching for her hat.

"What's up?" Juno asked, coming up behind Celsa.

"I'm going after Bunny. He's taking supplies out to Sancho." Barney spoke over his shoulder as he left the house.

"And I'll just tag along," Juno said, stretching his long legs toward the corral.

Barney was saddling his black when Fingers stamped up beside him. It was a few minutes before he spoke. It went against the grain with him to ask something of this silent man. His expression was slightly belligerent, as if he wanted to conceal his urgency to ride.

"If you're riding after the boy, I'd like to ride along."

"Saddle up," Barney answered, without looking up at him. Fingers was beginning to move away when Barney called after him indifferently, "Is Jack Solano around?"

Fingers tried unsuccessfully to repress his quick interest as he jerked around. Barney looked at him with his smooth blank look and Fingers tried to match his attitude. "In the bunkhouse, maybe."

Barney nodded and finished saddling without hurrying. He didn't want to make a great point of this. He might be wrong. He moved quietly toward the bunkhouse, knowing Fingers was covertly watching him, deeply curious.

Solano was stretched out on his bunk, a dark, handsome man lazily taking his ease. His expression turned subtly alert when he saw Barney standing in the door. He hadn't even heard him walking up and this impressed him and darkened his eyes with thought.

"I want to talk to you when I come back," Barney said, his voice slurred softly. "Be here, Solano."

"Where else?" Solano asked, smiling and insolent.

BARNEY stared at him, crowded for time and yet wanting to finish this at the same time. He turned away without another word. He swung up on his black, impatience pushing him out of the yard.

Lina was watching their preparation from the corral fence. Her full skirt billowed with a light breeze, displaying her slim ankles and the beginning round curve of her legs. But it was one time Catalina was not conscious of her pretty pose, for her face had assumed the same concern for Bunny all of them had.

"Juno!" Lina called as he started out of the yard. Her voice was protesting.

Juno swung around quickly.

He rode back, his dark eyes suddenly amused with a secret thought. He reined close to the girl on the fence. He reached out his big hands without speaking and without gentleness lifted her to the ground. His hands were hard on her slim waist and slipped upward on the full curve of her breast as he released her.

"Juno!" Lina gasped, indignant.

"Don't boss me around if I don't have no rights." His grin was wolfish as he watched her toss her head. "What did you want?"

"I was going to tell you to ride careful," Lina sputtered with a flushed face. "But now I don't care if you ride straight to the devil!"

Juno watched her whirl and run to the house.

"Lina!" He shouted after her, his face serious. He cursed under his breath as he wheeled his horse out of the yard.

Celsa was riding a little distance behind Barney and Fingers. Her face was troubled and it was not the affairs of Torreon worrying her now. It was Bunny—the very thought of him hurt her. His quick eagerness to please her. And his youthful admira-

tion that she had accepted casually. She observed the grim look on Fingers' face and wondered if he, too, was thinking of the boy loping around the ranch. She shook her head impatiently at her own pessimistic thoughts. Bunny was not going to get hurt in this!

They were turning off toward Red Dust country when she noticed a rider coming up the trail from Tucum. He was alone and traveling leisurely.

"Barney!" she shouted, and waited.

Barney swung his head around and followed her gesture. He jerked the reins on his horse and wheeled up beside her. Almost before he was close enough to identify him he knew the rider was Sheriff Benson.

Fingers sat silently behind Barney and Juno reined up beside him. They waited for young Bill Benson to speak, for they knew what brought him to Torreon.

Young Bill was a solid shape in his saddle, his glance steady as he rode up. He was untried—but he was not afraid. He removed his broad hat to Celsa and almost apologetically wiped the dust from his face with his handkerchief. He looked at each one of them carefully before his glance settled on Barney.

"I wanted to ask a few questions," he announced calmly.

"I thought you might," Barney said equably.

"What happened in the cabin on the Olla?"

"What did Zeke tell you?" Juno parried.

"I'm asking Ripple," Sheriff Benson stated flatly.

"Chesley had his gun ready when I stepped in the door—I had to draw," Barney answered quietly.

Young Bill's face remained stoic as he listened. There was a kind of patience in his attitude, a waiting and a watching. They wondered if he believed Barney. Was he thinking it was incredulous that while Chesley stood with his gun ready in one swift instant Barney had shot him?

Sheriff Benson said in his moderate habit, "I rode over to the cabin yesterday and there was no sign on Chesley's body."

Juno stared, quick anger lighting his eyes. "Well, by hell! Did you search Zeke?"

Young Bill studied Juno thoughtfully as he might a minor aggravation. He was not to be swerved from his dutiful questioning and turned back to Barney. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Ride down in the valley and talk to Gunthrie—he went in the cabin with Zeke after it happened," Barney suggested with odd intentness.

The sheriff sat still on his horse, face serious. It was a few minutes before he spoke again. "I'll do that. I might be riding back this way tomorrow. You'll be here?"

Barney nodded. There was a small light of admiration in his eyes. The sheriff *was* young, but he was not afraid. And in this moment Barney believed he would probably act according to his own vision of right. Yet—he had to live in the valley with Gunthrie. And Zeke.

Sheriff Benson lifted his hat to Celsa with a quick polite gesture and turned his horse back toward town. If he was aware of their silent regard as he rode off, his broad back never moved a muscle to show it.

Juno looked at Barney with reluctant respect for his grin. "The sheriff's not going to be Young Bill all his life," he predicted.

Barney shook his head and turned back to the canyon trail. And, he wondered grimly, what was going to happen if Young Bill tried to take him in for shooting Chesley?

He urged his horse ahead as the thought of Bunny returned to worry him. He kept thinking that even now the boy was riding into trouble. Too much had happened in the last few days to remind him of the wicked cunning of big Zeke. Zeke's presence at Torreon was crowding him and turning him rash and bold.

It was Juno riding with constantly roving eyes who first noticed the changing atmosphere. He yanked to a standstill, shouting and pointing eastward.

Fingers followed his hand and noticed it now. The yellow-brown cloudiness smudging and spreading over the darkening sky. A slight wind seemed to precede the cloud, coming up quickly. A strange hazy light seemed to illumine their faces.

"Sand storm?" Finger asked succintly.

"Yeah," Juno answered, twisting in his saddle as he watched the signs he knew well. "Moving in fast."

Barney reined in, listening, making his plans even as they talked. His mind seemed to move ahead of this moment, grasping the situation even as he watched the lowering sky.

"We'll have to split up, so we won't miss the boy," he told them. "Juno, you and Fingers ride around Red Dust and we'll try and ride through. If it gets too rough, find a shelter and wait until you can start out again. Remember we don't want any dead heroes. If you find the boy fire a couple of quick shots to let us know. Or if we find him, listen for our shots."

Juno nodded briefly and immediately swerved off the canyon trail, with Fingers following him. Barney watched them with narrowed eyes, not knowing if this was right. If they ran into a visiting party from the valley their small defense was split—and he had Celsa to think about. He shrugged away with his indecision and spurred his horse lightly.

The wind came up slowly, beginning with a thin eerie whistling sound in his ears. It caught up with them suddenly. The sky darkened even as a fine dust began blowing against them. He opened his mouth to call Celsa and immediately tasted dry gritty dust. He shouted for her to tie her scarf over her face even as he adjusted his own handkerchief over his nose and mouth. His eyes narrowed to gray slits against the constant irritating sting.

DURING the next slow mile the wind velocity increased by the minute. His black pushed steadily ahead, turning his head constantly, nervously, as if waiting for Barney to lead him out of this bewildering element. His steps gradually grew slower as the trail ahead became more difficult to follow.

The blowing sand was becoming a solid thing, the trail in front of them disappearing entirely in a darkening shadow. He knew now they would never be able to ride through the canyon, for he remembered the precarious footing there, even on a clear day.

He reined up, reaching out to grab the reins of Celsa's horse before she was lost from him. He shouted and knew when she shook her head that she had been unable to hear him. He reached for her and put his mouth against her ear.

"Do you know of shelter?"

"Old line camp!" She screamed the words against his face, knowing he could barely hear her. He motioned for her to take the lead and she urged her horse ahead. When she was directly in front of him she turned in the saddle, but he was lost from her sight in the blowing sand. She felt a moment of panic before his horse bumped against hers and she knew he was behind her.

She pulled up, the brief moment of panic unsettling her. She dismounted and, clutching her reins in one hand, searched for his horse blindly. He was stepping down and she grabbed his arm desperately. She put her mouth against his face and shouted:

"We'll lead the horses—or get lost! The camp isn't far." What she said came in broken gasps, for the wind was tearing the words from her mouth.

They began walking and she gripped his hand, with a tight urgency bending into the wind. She stumbled and felt his hard, strong grasp pulling her up. She had a queer sensation of walking through a solid wall, thinking there was never to be any ending. . . . Only to struggle forever through this sand-blinding darkness. Her chest felt weighted down with her quick shallow breathing that was never enough.

She knew every inch of Torreon and could have found her way in the darkest night, but she was afraid now that the strong wind might turn her off the old trail. Her fear was growing with each dragging step, taking her confidence and remaining strength. She was not a coward, she told herself. But this was like fighting some nameless frightening thing —in the dark. This went on until they walked directly into the lean-to beside the old line camp.

The rough scratch of the wood on her face startled her, and for a brief moment she was unable to grasp its meaning. She laughed a little hysterically as she searched for the door opening into the shed built

against the cabin. Her hand never left the rough touch of the wood, she was so afraid of losing the shelter.

She found the latch and pulled against it before the wind caught it with a freakish violence and wrenched it from her hand. The force of the opening threw her to the ground and she crawled back to reach for the reassuring touch of wood.

Barney was leading the horses inside the shed. She tried to get up and help him unsaddle, but her arms fell with a weighted deadness and she slipped down on her knees. She couldn't move from her crouched position and only dimly saw Barney moving in front of her. The weight of the saddles almost pitched him on his face and she knew he had taken a beating, too.

Then she felt his hands lifting her and she struggled to try and walk beside him. His arm was around her, lifting and dragging her as he searched for the cabin door. His hand moved ahead of him in complete darkness.

Celsa moved beside him, the weight of her boots a heavy frightening thing. She was so tired and sleepy! She never knew when Barney found the door and pushed it open. She fell across the cabin floor and he closed the door against the storm. The thin walls of the cabin muffled the sound of the wind in blessed relief.

Barney struck a match and he was a slim wavering shadow above her. He found the bunk in one corner of the room. He lifted Celsa in one last effort and staggered forward drunkenly to lay her down. He reached for the blanket rolled at the foot of the bed and fell down beside her. His eyes closed instantly and they slept.

VII

CELSA woke with the sound of the wind, the feeling of the cabin trembling under the wild onslaught. She had a sleepy, comfortable feeling of being safe and protected. She did not remember climbing in the bunk, but instinctively crept closer to the warmth beside her. Barney wakened with her slight movement and opened his eyes fully on her. She stared at him with partly opened eyes.

Suddenly she was warmly conscious of each separate part of her touching his slim hardness. Her breast yielding against his arm folded on his chest, her thigh curved familiarly against him. She had no desire to move; she was strangely warmed. It was the cold suggestive pressure of his gun against her that caused her to open her eyes wide.

"Barney," she whispered in confusion.

For only a moment his gray eyes regarded her with a curious alert look before he stood up and moved away from the bunk. He struck a match to find the oil lamp on the table. He did not look up as he adjusted the wick. The wavering light cast a dark shadow on his lean face.

"I think you know by now you are safe with me, Celsa," he said coolly and calmly.

Celsa sat up, flushing in embarrassment. She glared at him, knowing he had felt her relax against him. She lowered her eyes quickly as if to conceal her shamed thoughts. Why did he fill her mind? His complete indifference only heightened her . . . *Por Dios,* she would not think such things!

She swung her legs to the floor and winced as she felt the tired ache. She had not known that a few hours in a sand blow could so drain her strength. She rubbed her aching thighs ruefully.

"If you move around a little, the stiffness will leave," Barney said, without appearing to have noticed her.

She watched him move around the cabin with his light grace, completely rested, and felt a slight envy. He stood motionless by the window for a moment and she recognized the guarded look from the bend of his head and set of his shoulders. She had a moment's realization of the hell his life was, finding him in constant vigilance. She wondered silently if there was any man on earth he completely trusted.

"I'm hungry," she said lightly. She wanted to break through his preoccupation, wanted to see the strained dark look leave his face.

He turned, aware of her again. He regarded her as he might a spoiled and pampered child and with a touch of irony in his amusement.

"I'll see if the last pilgrim left any food," he told her with his polite coolness.

He began searching among the old newspapers and tin dishes on the shelf above the small table. He came up with the inevitable can of potted meat and a litttle coffee in a crumpled brown sack. He sat them on the table with a small mocking bow.

"Not the usual fare for the princess in the tower."

If he expected her quick temper to explode he was disappointed, for instead she smiled. For the first time she looked at him without any pose of pride, her mouth curved in a impish smile making her look very young and defenseless.

"Good enough for this pilgrim," she answered friendily. "If you can build a fire in that black relic, I can make coffee."

His face was quiet and thoughtful as he turned to the stove. He was uneasily aware of the girl working beside him. She was busy filling the battered coffee pot with water from his canteen and carefully pouring in the coffee. She concentrated on her job seriously like a young girl, slim and dainty beside him as he opened the potted meat with his knife.

He moved away from her and watched her set the table with tin plates and cups with all the formality she might have used in a dinner at Torreon House. He watched her with curious concentration, his gray eyes guarded and enigmatic.

"I think the coffee is boiling," she said, looking up.

HE MOVED over and lifted the pot and filled their cups. He was silent as he sat down across from her. Even with her black cloud of hair blown careless and the dusty smudges on her cheeks she was lovely and desirable.

She was eating with unashamed hunger and drinking the pale weak coffee as if she had never known better. Her plate was empty before he spoke again.

"I'm sorry I neglected to bring your silver plates from Torreon, ma'am," he said, with light scarcasm.

The bright gold flecks suddenly flashed in her dark eyes. He refused to accept and meet her friendly overtures while they were held in this old line camp. He was being deliberately rude and mocking her prideful ways. Her quick temper met his mood.

"And you—did you dine on tin plates in Virginia?" she asked, knowing he never spoke of his old life. She bit her lips as she watched his face change.

"No, ma'am," he said distantly.

He moved away from the table to stare out of the window again. Her taunting words had brought back old memories—unwanted. His face turned bleak as he looked back.

Celsa had a chilled, lonely feeling as she stacked the tin plates on the table and walked back to the bunk. She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders, knowing all the time the coldness was within her and not in the cabin. She was sorry for her impulsive words—and not sorry. His past teased and tormented her with the small fragments she had pieced together.

"Did you never go back, Barney?" she asked, hating herself for wanting to know.

"No," he answered shortly.

"What of your old home?" she asked, stubbornly persistent.

"It had to be sold to pay taxes," he said. The straight line of his mouth was edged with a pale shadow. "Anything else you want to know?"

She lowered her eyes, suddenly afraid of him. He stood above the bunk staring down at her with a dark bitter face.

"Don't you want to know about the girl? She was my girl, you know. His voice was hard, cold.

"No. I don't want to know any more," Celsa whispered, pulling the blanket closer around her.

"Don't you want to know about the night I found her in her bedroom with her lover? She was beautiful even then, Celsa. Even with her nightgown torn and the marks of his hands on her white body, and her fair hair falling around her face like an angel—and not at all like the bitch she was!"

"Damn you, stop!" Celsa cried hoarsely. She couldn't stand the cold mad sound of his voice.

He stared down at her and saw that she was trembling and that her eyes were too

bright in her pale face. He turned away. There had been no release in telling the ugly story. Only the same remembered fury, with an impulse to kill.

"You'd better rest," he said almost naturally. "When the storm breaks we'll ride out of here."

Celsa lay back on the bunk, her thoughts whirling around what he had told her. She could understand the shock he had known when he had found that woman, could almost feel some of his wild anger. But what of the fair-haired woman with her lover shot dead at her feet? What had been in her heart that night? Had she already regretted her folly? Or perhaps she had been incapable of real love. The woman with the face of an angel.

Barney stood quietly by the window, remote and lost in his own thoughts.

"I know you hate me for talking about it," Celsa began in a low voice. "But, did you never think it might have been you falling in love with someone else?"

"I thought of it," he said briefly.

SHE forced herself to go on. She knew somehow if he could remember without the old killing hate he would be released from memory of that fair girl.

She said carefully, "Well, isn't it possible for a woman to see a man and to want him and forget everything else? Even honor? Sometimes men seem to think the only women who want passionate love are immoral women. . . . They never credit a virtuous woman with normal emotions."

She was only feeling her way, having never thought of these things before. And now even in her innocence she realized it was true. She had seen desire in the eyes of men, and had scorned human emotion. She had never thought that one day she would understand. It seemed to her now that she had been a proud fool. And she was not shocked at thinking this way.

"That's a hell of a thing for a young girl to say," Barney said roughly.

"I have heard that Southern men like their women especially pure in heart—and literally," she said quietly.

"That's enough," he said coldly. "What do you know of life, living in your tower?"

"I'm learning a little—from you."

He walked back to the bunk, light and quick. His face was dark and smooth as he looked down.

"I asked you once before—what do you want of me? From the beginning you've been making some kind of picture of me in your head. Why? Was it because I didn't bow down in front of your shrine?"

"No! I don't know why."

"No?" He looked down at the slim body, every soft line accented in the snug riding clothes. Her face flushed under his steady stare. He sat down on the bunk beside her and she gasped as his hard hands gripped her shoulders, pushing her back on the bunk. She struggled against him, afraid of the dark face bending closer. She heard his short laugh as he put his hand under her chin, lifting her face. His mouth was rough, holding hers until she was swept dizzily in emotion. She cold not think, could only feel his hard demanding mouth forcing her to respond.

He raised his head, and when he spoke, his words were angry. "You are like her, after all."

She cried out incoherently, turning her head away.

"No," he said softly, forcing her to look at him.

She closed her eyes wanting to shut out his dark face above her. He was kissing her, slowly, deliberately, arousing emotions she had never known she could feel. His hand was on her slim throat, at the button on her shirt, searching for the pointed softness. She turned against him, pressing closer, wanting him to possess her. She could not be close enough to his slim hardness, or give enough to his strong searching hands.

"Barney," she whispered against his lips.

He released her suddenly and she fell back on the bunk. She stared up at him with wide, blank eyes. His sun-browned face was pale and his hands made fists at his side.

"I ought to be shot," he said hoarsely.

"I'm not like that—other woman, Barney," she said, not understanding the look on his face. "You are the only man who has ever made love to me."

"I know," he said, and turned away from her.

"You mean you just don't want me?" she asked dazedly. He didn't answer and the soft color swept over her face as she thought of something else. "Were you trying to hurt me because of what she did to you? You wanted to get even with someone?"

"Maybe—at first," he said, without looking at her. "I have no right to—"

She wouldn't listen now. She thought she knew.

"You ought to feel free now, Barney."

He didn't turn from the window and it grew very quiet in the cabin. In this moment they heard the first sound of falling rain. The sand storm had passed over.

VIII

LIFTING her face to the cool, sweet rain, Celsa was hoping perhaps it would wash away the shamed humiliation that kept returning. The slim man riding silently beside her had made love to her to strike back at another woman who had hurt him.

He was a knowing man, Celsa reasoned silently, with a flaming face. He must have been aware of her passionate response back there in the cabin. This was the thought that kept returning to torment her now as she rode on. She hated herself—and him. Lost pride caused a sudden ache in her throat.

She turned off the canyon trail knowing they couldn't ride through it in the rain. She did not look at Barney. The silence between them was carefully guarded with averted faces.

Suddenly he spoke her name quietly in warning, and she stared ahead in the misty night. She saw men on horseback and strained her eyes anxiously for the slight figure of Bunny. She was directly beside the riders before she saw that Juno was holding Bunny in the saddle in front of him. The boy's head hung limply on his chest and Juno had thrown his own jacket around him to try and keep him warm.

She turned rigid in the saddle and had to force words through stiff lips. "Juno, he's not—?" She was afraid to go on.

"He's alive, but he's been shot and we've got to get him home," Juno said with grim control. "We found him at Sancho's camp. His supplies were scattered all over the ground around him. He kept saying over and over that they had taken Sancho."

"Who took Sancho?" Barney asked softly.

Juno shook his head. "Bunny passed out before he could tell us." He was watching Barney steadily and each was thinking the same thing. This deed would make Barney ride into Tucum. It was all a part with the disappearance of Flores and the shooting of Chesley. This was the climatic action. And there was only one man in the valley big enough to run crazy wild and do it. That man who had told Barney Ripple that one day he would make him ride to Tucum.

"There wasn't any sign of Sancho's flock," Fingers put in soberly.

Juno was still watching Barney. His ugly face twisted queerly with his thoughts. "You'll wait until we get the boy fixed up at Torreon?" he pleaded.

Barney nodded slowly. "Yes. There'll be no need for hurry. I'm afraid we're already too late to help Sancho."

Celsa sickened. She had always known what would happen to the old Mexican sheepherder if he left the desert. Reality that he had been unable to face would return to his mind. What would happen then to the peace he found on the desert?

The old servant, Maria, met them at the doors of Torreon. She took one look at the pale, unconscious boy in Juno's arms and moved with a surprising quickness to take charge, despite her size. She led the way to the bedroom, her rapid Spanish preceding her from room to room as she ordered the servant girls before her. A sick room must be made ready, hot water, clean bandages for a clean wound. Someone must ride for the doctor in the little settlement. And, in between the efficient rapid orders she was hovering over the boy with a constant murmuring of affectionate, encouraging clucking.

Celsa's slim figure was in and out of the sick room taking over Maria's directions. She helped undress Bunny, held the lamp steady while Maria washed the wound and placed clean cloths over it until the doctor could change them. She was white, but

calm, entirely the mistress of Torreon.

Juno paced restlessly around the patio, stopping only to watch Maria as she passed through, her loud orders preceding her waddling figure. Barney sat quietly on the stone bench, his cigarette steady in his hand. No one could guess what his thoughts were behind that smooth face. Juno envied him his strong control and ability to wait patiently.

"Juno," Lina called from the wide doors of the sala.

HE SWUNG toward her, scowling and anxious, thinking of this night's work. Lina moved back into the room and he followed her. She looked appealing, and her pretty face was worried as she looked up at him. She knew what was happening on the ranch tonight—and what was going to happen. She had to tell Juno something and now that he was beside her she couldn't think of how to do it.

"What is it, Lina?" Juno asked, suddenly kind. Her anxious face broke through his abstraction and he patted her shoulder absently.

"Are you riding with Barney tonight?" Lina asked desperately. It was not what she had meant to say at all.

Juno nodded briefly. He was slightly impatient with her for even asking. Didn't she know he would ride for Torreon? Her jerked his head toward Barney with a dark look.

"There's going to be hell to pay!"

Lina moved impulsively toward him. "I wanted to tell you—" she began, and stopped. She couldn't tell him anything unless he helped her and he wasn't going to. She managed to smile a little as she finished, "Ride careful, Juno."

Juno stared down at her with a puzzled face, uncertain. This was not what she had intended to tell him. He knew it. It was at this moment that Celsa stepped out of the sick room and Juno's head turned to follow her. Lina followed his movement with a pale face.

"Always Celsa!" she cried, and whirled away from him. "You never see anyone else!"

Juno swore softly under his breath before he turned back to the patio. There had been no mistaking the look on Lina's face as she had looked up at him. And was it always Celsa with him? It was not the time to be thinking of this! He stopped Maria on one of her numerous trips.

"Will he live?" he asked in a harassed voice.

"Por Dios! You ask me that?" Maria countered impatiently. Then she noticed the anxiety creasing his dark brow and her face softened. "I cannot know—but I think he will live."

Barney was moving toward the door even as she finished speaking. His light cat step had never been more pronounced. The smooth hard look on his face was dangerous and determined. Juno's long legs swung to catch up with him.

Celsa watched them leave and suddenly her jaw set and her eyes flashed bright. She flung down the towels she was carrying and grabbed her jacket from the chair as she started for the door. She brushed lightly past the protesting Maria, not even hearing her. Even Maria was not going to hold her today. No one was going to stop her from riding!

She was running toward her horse when Barney stopped her. She was only a slim fleeting shadow in the dim morning light, but he knew it was Celsa. Only one girl ran with the light grace of a young boy like that.

"Not this time, Celsa!"

"Yes!" she shouted back. Her light voice even sounded like a boy's in its earnestness. "I told you once I ride when I want to! I will ride behind you or follow you—but I will ride today!"

Juno thought for a wild moment that Barney was going to pick her up bodily and carry her back to the house. He seemed to change his mind as he stared down at the pallor of her willful face.

"I haven't time to fight you, also," he murmured in a odd voice, "but you may be sorry before this day is through."

"I'm not a fool," she answered with subdued tenseness. "Don't you think I know what you're going to do?"

They stood there looking at each other, with all the things they might have said

standing between them. And the things that had been said holding them apart. There had been no chance for understanding between them. Barney turned away from her and headed for his horse.

JUNO was riding up, and behind him the Torreon men sat their saddles quietly waiting. Barney stopped abruptly.

"No man has to ride tonight," he told them, feeling strange. "This is my job now."

They regarded him silently. No man moved. Here was the man the Celsa Torreon they all adored had chosen to lead their outfit. It was as simple as that. If he was going to ride into Tucum today, they were going to ride. They waited patiently for him to be through with talking. His crew now.

His gray eyes darkened as he seemed to study each man in turn. He knew a part of this was their deep natural loyalty to Torreon making them willing to fight for it. But it was more. They were with him, too.

"I'm obliged," he said in his softest Southern twang.

Fingers moved forward. His puckered mouth was folded in a thin line of disapproval and his brusque voice was tinted with apology. "We lost one man in the shuffle," he informed. "Jack Solano has been missing since last night."

"May he rest in peace," Barney answered quietly. And he knew then he had been right about Solano. Jack had become Zeke Dooley's man.

The men all nodded grimly.

Barney mounted his big black and reined around toward Tucum Valley. Juno and Celsa fell in behind him. A stray thought occurred to Juno and he jerked his head around and saw Lina Gomez standing in the shadows of the cottonwood, silently watching.

"I'll be right with you," Juno murmured, and wheeled out of line.

The moment Lina saw his tall shape in the saddle riding toward her she picked up her full skirts and ran for the house. Juno swung down from his horse and his long legs moved toward her. He laughed soundlessly in his throat as he pursued her. He caught her arm and turned her to face him. She looked up at him with trembling lips and indignant brown eyes.

"Let me go!" she cried huskily. "You've got to ride with Celsa."

"Not this time," Juno drawled with a new emotion. "I'm riding with Barney Ripple. And when I come back I've got something to say to you."

"Juno," breathed Lina, close to tears, "say nothing you don't mean."

Juno's hand was rough on her arm, swaying her toward him. He looked down at her warm tempting lips and was torn between desire and the sound of retreating hoof beats.

"You'll believe me when I tell you," he said, with his old grin. He turned and ran for his horse, his face feeling hot as he galloped after the men of Torreon.

Celsa darted a quick glance at him as he fell in beside her. Her black brows climbed upward in amusement. And he silently cursed the flush he felt creeping into his face. If he knew her well—she also knew him. She was not deceived by his wicked grin and wink in answer to her knowing smile. She had noticed the small, patient figure waiting in the shadows.

No one spoke as they started down the mountain.

IX

THERE were no quiet in the town of Tucum now. Sancho had come to town. All that day the old man had wandered down the street breaking the tense waiting silence with his gentle calling.

He was searching the town for his young wife and child. All that day long the people of Tucum had watched him peeping in the doors and standing by the windows, calling her name over and over . . . Elena! Elena!

Sheriff Bill Benson had tried again and again to talk to the old Mexican. Now he was pacing the floor in his office as he listened to the shuffling steps on the board walk and heard the gentle voice. When he could stand it no longer he went out and approached the old man.

"Come back to the desert with me, Sancho," Young Bill said kindly, "and wait for Elena there."

Sancho only looked at him blankly without hearing him, and turned away to continue searching. He had always known that the day he left his flock and returned to town that Elena would be there . . . And now he was waiting for her.

All day his steps had sounded with dragging patience up the board walk on one side of Cottonwood Street and down the other side. He had not stopped once during the long, hot day. His slight figure became tired, a little slower, but never once did he cease his relentless search . . .

Zeke Dooley sat at a table in the rear of the Sombrero, idly playing solitaire. Obviously he took no notice of the old man's wanderings, but there was a forbidding look in his pale eyes that held a man from approaching him. A pale mad glint of defiance that dared any man to mention that old man on the street to him. His thick red hair stood wild on his head and his mouth was an ugly line across his face. He played each card deliberately, flinging each one down with a smart twist of his big hand.

Grogan polished glasses behind the bar. As his uneasiness became more and more marked he glanced covertly at Zeke more and more frequently. Each time Sancho reached the saloon swinging door and peered in with his gentle call, perspiration broke loose on the saloonman's forehead and his hands grew wet. He would stare down at the trembling glass in his hand with unseeing eyes. He did not look up any longer when Sancho reached his door. It was no longer bearable.

Clarence Richey left his general store and hurried down the street after Sancho. He tried to persuade him to step into his cool store to eat something and rest a little while. His tall thin figure jerked as he talked to the old man.

"Come in out of the sun, Sancho," Richey pleaded in his high, nervous voice. "Come in and eat and rest."

Sancho smiled a vague blank smile, not even understanding. He walked politely around Richey on the board walk and down the street. Thoughts of Elena completely filled his mind.

Richey re-entered his store clasping his hands in agitation, unable to sit down or move about his daily business. He was constantly drawn to the window or the door to search the street for sight of the old man. Only to turn away with a sick expression.

There had been no rest for any of the townspeople all this day. Their uneasiness grew with their anxious feeling of guilt. Had not each man of them had a part in bringing old Sancho in from the desert? When the valley men turned against Torreon they had been quick to give their support and sympathy. And deep in their subconscious thoughts had been a secret guilty knowledge concerning the disappearance of Flores. And now they walked the street with Sancho in his search for Elena . . .

It was around noon when George Gunthrie and Sam Roscoe, another valley rancher, rode into town. Most of George's Double G crew and Sam's Long Bar outfit rode in behind them.

SHERIFF BENSON stood in the door of his office and watched the men ride down the street. He didn't speak, and Gunthrie refused to meet the look in his eyes. He did not know if he only imagined the silent look of accusation on Young Bill's face, or whether it was only imprinted in his mind.

He tried to avoid looking at old Sancho walking down the street. He had heard the news from town and did not like it. He did not want to see Sancho or have any part of the Mexican's vigil. He headed directly for the Sombrero. Zeke would be there.

Sam Roscoe followed quickly in his footsteps, with a determined red face. He brushed at his dusty range clothes with his stetson after he stepped down from his horse. He didn't realize what he was doing—it was anything to avoid looking at Sancho slowly crossing the street. And still he seemed to see him, his weary figure barely moving.

Gunthrie stopped abruptly before the swinging doors with a stifled curse. Lounging indolently against the wall, watching the street were the men of Zeke's crew. They made no effort to conceal their purpose. Gleaming guns in well-oiled holsters proclaimed that. In each sallow, watching face alert eyes turned warily with each fresh hap-

pening. In the game they were playing they were dead the moment they abandoned their watch.

Gunthrie batted the swinging doors with a vicious fist and stalked past Grogan behind the bar without a glance. He had come a long way this day toward no longer caring who learned about a certain dark night in the hills. A man can stand so much, and no more. He moved toward the back of the saloon.

Zeke glanced up at his neighbor rancher's belligerent face and back down at his cards with a grim smile. He didn't even bother to conceal his contempt for Gunthrie and his tame dog, Roscoe. His eyes swung toward Jack Solano standing at the end of the bar, partially concealed in the shadowed room. It was the briefest of looks, but held complete understanding.

"Why did you bring the old man in?" Gunthrie asked bluntly.

Zeke placed a card carefully on the table before looking up. There was a pale warning glint in his narrowed eyes when he did.

"I thought it was time to settle with Torreon," Zeke said with careless frankness.

"You knew this was the one thing that would bring Torreon to town in full force?" Gunthrie stated his question.

Zeke looked at him with bold directness and nodded.

"You wanted to bring this whole thing to a head," Gunthrie went on. He was seeing the real Zeke for the first time, and realizing that in the man was a cruel ruthlessness that would stop at nothing. Or had he known it that night in the hills and gone along with him for his own profit? "By hell," he cursed, "you want another Lincoln County war! And the stink of that one still fills the Territory!"

"Did you ever stop to think if there was another such war that the militia would ride in and that the Government might just declare Torreon land open for homesteaders? They're not going to stand for another such war . . ." Zeke's low murmuring voice reached only Gunthrie and Roscoe, but holding this revelation of his sly planning shocked them. He went on, "When that happens I'll be sitting on top of the mountain! If not the world!"

Gunthrie seemed to fall apart as he stood before the big redhead. His blunt face turned gray as he listened.

"You've planned this from the beginning, Dooley," he said. "Torreon has never planned on moving down in the valley . . . They've never thought of bringing sheep onto the south range . . ." Gunthrie spoke in a dead voice. And it seemed to him now that he had known whereof he did speak from the beginning. He was afraid of his own thinking, of his own greed. But he had never imagined it would go this far, not to another Lincoln County War.

"Don't be a damn fool!" Zeke told him brutally. "You knew it all along."

"I didn't bargain on a wholesale war, Zeke. I got a notion I'll be sorry till the day I die that I ever listened to you!"

ZEKE reminded him softly, "A little late, Gunthrie. You are forgetting a herder named Flores . . . I seem to remember that quite a few valley men rode that night to drive him off the south range."

"Drive him off!" Gunthrie protested. "Not kill him!" He flinched visibly at the sound of the name Flores. "I haven't forgotten anything, and I'll pay for the part I played in that damned night . . . But from now on—listen now, count me out of the rest of this stinking mess!"

He did not turn away from Zeke's hard stare. He was through and he meant it. He no longer cared what happened to him as long as he was clear of it.

"The minute you ride out of town with your men behind you I'm going to tell Sheriff Bill where to look for what's left of Flores." Zeke's voice shook with emphasis as he thrust his big head toward Gunthrie.

"Tell him," Gunthrie said tiredly. "And tell him I'll be at my place if he wants me."

"I'll remember this when I'm sitting pretty on Torreon," Zeke told him, settling back in his chair. "Now, get out of here before I kill you."

The big man meant every word he said. The mad desire was in his cruel face. It was all there for a man to see.

Gunthrie turned and walked out of the

(Turn to Page 42)

SEE Magazine Brings Entertainment Right Down Your Alley!

In an exclusive article in *SEE*, Junie McMahon, one of the world's greatest bowlers, tells you how to better your score. You'll find entertaining articles to suit your taste in every issue of *SEE*!

For more tips to help your bowling game, tune in to "Bowling Time" on your local TV station. Check your local listing for time.

Buy your copy of *SEE* Magazine today. On sale at all newsstands — only 15c

101P

saloon. Standing behind the bar, Grogan looked away from him, as if he shared his shame and did not want to see his face. At that moment the rancher did not fear a shot in the back. He had no feeling left.

Sam Roscoe, the loyal follower from his crew, stared at his retreating back. He wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his sleeve. He, too, was deadly afraid, but he had to speak.

"I'm out of this too, Zeke," he said through trembling lips.

"Get out of here, you damn turn-tail!" Zeke almost whispered.

Jack Solano walked forward from the end of the bar.

"I thought you was a Torreon man!" Roscoe said, staring at Jack foolishly. He was almost paralyzed in his steps.

"Zeke said to get out," Jack said, flashing his handsome smile and bright eyes.

Sam Roscoe backed out of the saloon, tripping a little as he passed through the doors. He was not ashamed of being afraid. He knew he had just walked away from a murder. His own.

Sheriff Benson came across the dusty street and intercepted him as Gunthrie was walking aimlessly toward his horse.

"Wait up, Gunthrie," Young Bill said. The neutral look was missing from his expression. He had always liked Gunthrie, and respected him for running the Double G with a slow, sure honesty and without the common greed of a lot of ranchmen of this day. There was no respect in his face today, though; only scorn and a kind of pity. "I've made no move as yet in this trouble in the valley. But I'm warning you now that from today on I'm taking sides."

"Damn you, that's what I want you to do!" Gunthrie's pent-up emotion exploded. "And don't hurrah me! You were here when all this was beginning—the same as I was."

"Yes," Benson acknowledged quietly. But his eyes were hard and angry. "But I never knew what happened to Flores. And I think you do."

Gunthrie heard him out with a stricken expression in his gray face. He watched Young Bill turn away and cross the street to his office. And he knew as he stood there that from this day on things would never be the same for him in Tucum Valley. This day would end and the dust would settle, but no one would ever forget it.

He had turned to move away when he again noticed Zeke's men still standing in front of the Sombrero watching the street with insolent stares. His temper broke wild and he strode toward them.

"If you're smart you'll get out of town!" he shouted hoarsely. "Zeke will get no help from the men in the valley today. I'll see to that if I have to shoot my own neighbors!"

They stared after him with astonished expressions, then turned to one another with a baffled, curious looks. One man laughed shortly and shook his head.

"That old man out there walking up and down the street has spooked the whole town," another man said, covertly watching his neighbor to see what he thought.

X

NEAR sundown, Barney and the men of Torreon rode into Tucum—a silent, grim bunch. They were not fighting men in the usually accepted sense of the word. They were mainly plain cowmen. And contrary to common belief every man in the West was not a potential Wild Bill with a gun. Living out here in the West each naturally could use a gun, but until this day their targets had been mostly rattlesnakes or hunting a buck in the hills with a rifle. There was a big difference when the game was man.

Celsa, pale and silent, was riding a short distance behind Barney. She did not look at him. She had never really known him and had lost him without a chance of ever having him. Always he had held her away with his cold reasoning and a memory. He had been right when he'd said she had made a picture of him in her mind from that first night. Or had it been since the first time Juno had told about meeting him? If he survived today she would be able to hold Torreon, and for the first time she realized she no longer cared.

They pulled up in front of Richey's general store. Barney stepped down, came around and put up his hands to lift Celsa down. His

hands were strong on her slim waist and he released her with reluctance. Standing in front of her he removed his hat as he stared down at her. His sun-bleached hair falling over his forehead gave him that young, careless look she had noticed only once before. And she loved him more than she loved the Torreon land.

As she looked away from him she saw Sancho on the opposite side of the street, noted his tired, dragging steps and heard his hoarse call. He was completely unaware of any excitement on the street. She clutched Barney's arm with frightening intensity.

"Barney," she whispered in acute realization, "I have done this to Sancho! And it's my fault Bunny was shot. And now I know it isn't worth it!"

"No, not you," he said, looking down at her tormented face. "Men like Zeke Dooley will find an excuse to take something—or to make a war."

"Zeke," she echoed slowly. "If I go to Zeke now, perhaps I can stop any more of this!"

Barney's hands were suddenly hard on her shoulders, forcing her to look up at him. "No . . . this is my job. And I'm going to make a try."

"You," she began huskily, "are the one I don't want hurt."

"Don't say that, Celsa," he said roughly.

"I want to say it," she said with stiff pride. "I want to ride away with you tonight—if you want me."

"Don't look at me like this," he said through clenched teeth. "You must know after what happened in the cabin that I want you. If I thought we had one chance in a million for happiness I'd take you."

"I didn't know," she said, with a kind of wonder.

"You must have known we shared the same feeling that night."

"No. I thought you were still thinking of —her."

"Not since the first time I held you," he told her harshly. "Now you know. Get off the street, Celsa."

The strange bright flecks of gold were plain in her eyes as she looked at him. Without another word she turned into the general store. She was proudly erect and never looked back.

The crew had turned away from them, suddenly busy with their horses in front of the tie-rack. Only Juno had glanced at them occasionally with understanding and a kind of pity. He still thought too much pride between them was holding them apart.

Barney came toward his men, his face smooth and hard, and his eyes as gray as slate. He knew what to expect now . . .

"This is my fight—unless the valley men step in," he told them with cold emphasis. "The man who forgets it will answer to me."

JUNO grinned. The dangerous excitement of danger already was bringing out his reckless humor. His dark eyes gleamed as he surveyed the street, picking his spot. The rest of the Torreon crew fanned out behind him, keeping to this end of Cottonwood Street.

Barney began walking down the board walk, his light quick step barely audible. His slim figure was held loosely with a kind of grace that had brought him here today.

Only one other man moved on the street. Old Sancho's shuffling steps were still leading him up and down the board walk to stop before each doorway.

Barney Ripple did not wait until he reached the swinging doors of the Sombrero. Famous gunfighters before him had been shot down when they stepped through dark doorways. Not so long ago, Billy the Kid had sent his *"Quien es?"* ahead of him into a dark room and had never lived to hear the answer. A grim warning for the men who walked in his steps.

"Come out of there, Dooley!" Barney did not raise his voice, but the strange soft voice was as shocking as a sudden gun blast.

He did not have long to wait. Zeke batted the swing doors wide with a vicious fist and stepped out.

He looked up and down the street with a slow arrogance before he planted himself squarely in the middle of the board walk. His hair fell over his forehead like a fiery streak and his eyes were pale mad slits.

"I had a feeling back there in that little town in Texas," Zeke said slowly, with a

kind of ironic humor, "that I ought to have finished it then."

"You can't play cards that haven't been dealt," Barney told him almost gently. "Now, you'll answer to me for bringing Sancho in from the desert. Tell him the lie you used on him to pull him into town."

Zeke grinned suddenly. "That was the play that brought you gunning! I figured it would. And what does it matter about a crazy old Mex herder? He ought to have been dead long ago—along with his wife and kid!"

Across the street Sancho stopped walking. He was listening to big Zeke with a terrible look of clarity.

He began walking across the street, his dragging steps kicking up the dust in front of him. His old black coat swung around him, flapping at his trembling knees with a soft sound. He spoke to Barney without looking at him.

"Step aside, stranger. This man is mine," Sancho's voice was tired, but sane.

It was deadly quiet on the street now. No man moved as Sancho began fumbling in his coat pocket for his gun.

Zeke laughed a short, shocked laugh. His eyes darted to Barney, standing so still. He knew it was plain murder to draw on the old man. He had no fear of him, and anyway Barney would stop him.

Still Barney watched the old man. He never lost complete awareness of Zeke facing him, but he was thinking of Sancho.

"He's yours, Sancho," he said finally.

The old man had pulled out his rusty gun and his arm trembled violently as he tried to aim.

Zeke watched him, bewildered, waiting for Barney to stop this. It came to him startlingly clear that Barney wasn't going to interfere with Sancho. He went a little mad then with the same craziness that held the town, and went for his gun with quick practiced skill.

Every man on the street knew Zeke's first shot hit the old man. Sancho was almost knocked backward, but still he kept raising the gun, his eyes fixed steadily on Zeke. He was using both hands to steady the gun when he finally fired.

IT SEEMED as if all in the whole town held their breaths as they waited. No one thought Sancho could stay on his feet long enough to fire. He was dying in his tracks.

The old man's shot rang through the town. One shot. Zeke jerked spasmodically and fell where he stood, rolled once, and lay still in the dusty street.

Sancho seemed to crumple as he watched. He lived long enough to see Zeke dead before him, and to turn his head toward Barney as he fell.

Celsa ran from the store, sinking to her knees beside the small crumpled figure. She caught her breath in a stifled sob as she turned his head on her lap. Her hand was soft and gentle as she wiped the dirt from his calm, still face.

Barney stood frozen on the board walk and watched her. He knew he could have saved the old man's life, but somehow there was a equalizing justice in this scene before him. Zeke had really taken the old man's life when he had lured Sancho in from the desert. Or had the herder died the night he'd found Elena and his baby in the burning cabin? Barney's constant alert guard left him in this moment and he became only a man watching a woman.

There was one other man in the picture. Jack Solano stepped quietly from the door of the Sombrero. Barney never heard the whispering sound of the swinging doors closing behind him.

"Barney!" Juno shouted wildly.

Barney jerked around, but it was too late. He had not remembered that Solano had become Zeke's man. Jack fired as Barney turned. Almost simultaneously came the sound of a gun behind him. Then Fingers, with an anxious, puckered face was beside him.

"Where did he get you, boy?" he asked hoarsely.

Barney shook his head. Juno's warning had saved him when he had swung around. But who had fired the shot from behind him that had killed Solano? And then he saw the gun in Fingers' hand carefully poised in three fingers.

Fingers stamped on down the board walk and stood above the still figure of Jack

Solano. "So long, handsome," he said without rancor.

"Anyone else?" Barney called in a soft, chilling voice.

Sheriff Benson, standing quietly in his office door, spoke now in his calm cautious manner.

"Zeke's men rode out of town a little while ago . . . They kept muttering something about the old man."

George Gunthrie crossed the street with heavy steps. He called, "Double G!" once, loudly. He didn't look at Barney or any of the men of Torreon. After he mounted, Young Bill spoke his name carefully and he swung around.

"I want you to hear this, Gunthrie," Benson said slowly. "That sheriff up in Bullitt County died. And he confessed that Barney Ripple didn't know anything about his crooked deal. He took him on as a front. And at the end he cleared Ripple's name."

Gunthrie digested this silently. He was no longer sure of himself, or of anything.

"I'll be at home if you want me, Bill," he said finally, and rode slowly out of town.

Sam Roscoe beckoned his men and moved toward his horse. He looked once at the old man in Celsa's arms and his face turned gray and sick. He had not wanted to be a part of this. He followed Gunthrie out of town.

Young Bill stood in the door of his office and mopped his face with a wet handkerchief. He walked unsteadily back in his office. There would be no war in the valley now. But he wondered soberly if there would ever again be the same old feeling of peace.

Juno was suddenly beside Celsa. "Are you going to let him ride out of your life?" he demanded.

CELSA looked up at him dazedly, not understanding. She followed his glance down Cottonwood Street and saw Barney riding out of town. She turned quickly toward Fingers. "Will you take care of Sancho?"

Fingers lifted the old man carefully from her arms without a word. Celsa ran for her horse and when she was up turned on Juno with a return of her natural spirit.

"What about you? Are you going to let Lina wait forever?"

Juno grinned and winked at her. "Only for as long as it takes me to ride to Torreon!" And his ugly face lighted with anticipation.

Cottonwood Street was as quiet as the night when he had ridden in, Barney was thinking. The slim roll of paper in his pocket was his only evidence he even had ridden through Tucum. His thin, sun-browned face settled in lines of weary patience as he rode out.

He did not turn in his saddle when he heard a horse pounding after him. Never again would he ride looking over his shoulder. He had reached an end to that.

Celsa pulled up beside him. He looked away from her beautiful expressive face.

"Ride back, Celsa."

"I will ride with you—or after you!" Celsa told him again, her mouth stubborn.

"If I take you now I will never let you go."

"I know," she answered, with dark shining eyes.

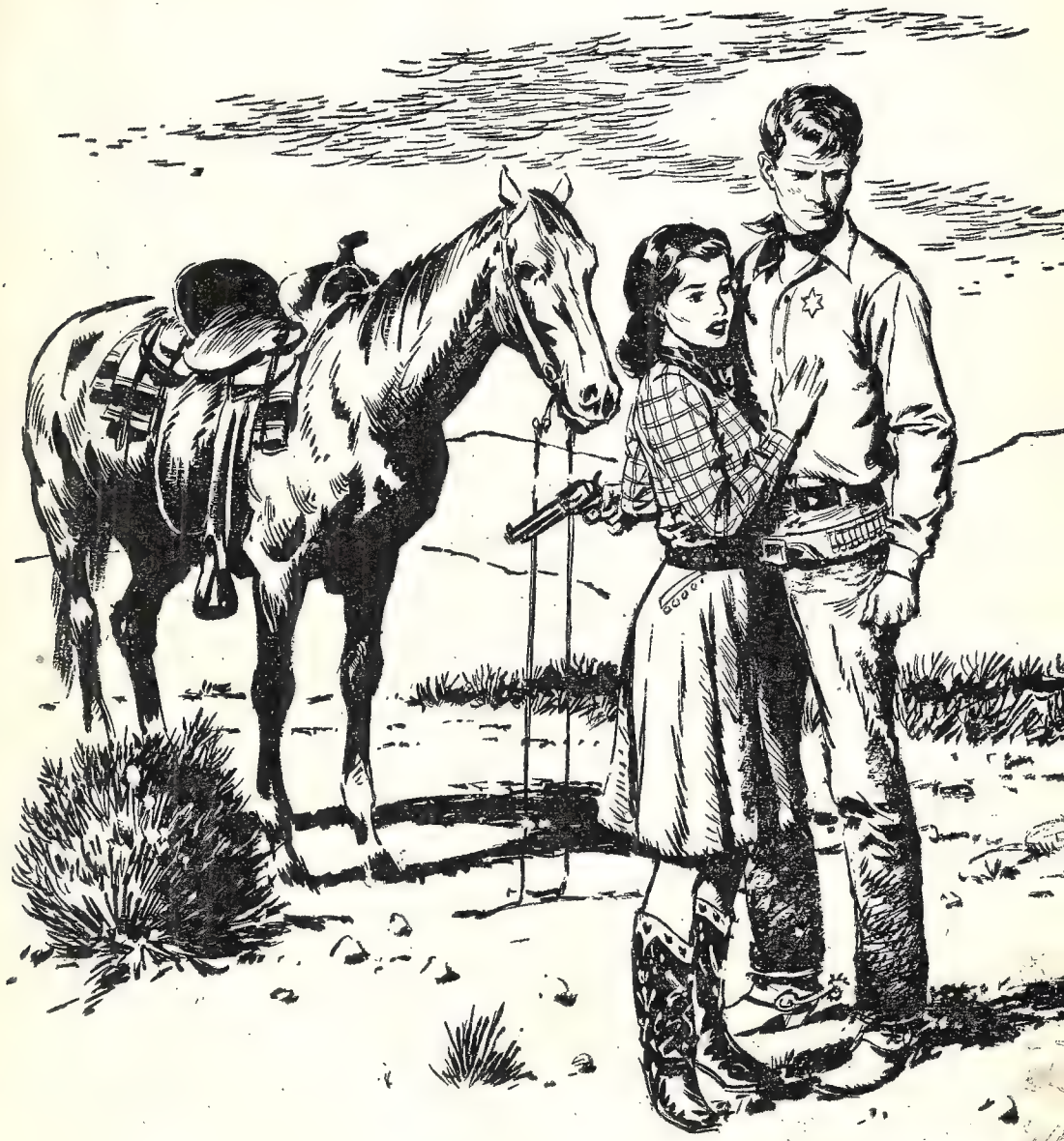
He reached out with slim hard hands and lifted her over to his saddle in front of him. His mouth came down hard as his hands tightened on the slim, soft body of Celsa Torreon.

Coming in the Next Issue

BIG RED

***An Exciting Novel by* BURT ARTHUR**

ALSO—TWO OTHER NOVELS, PLUS MANY STORIES AND FEATURES!



They tried to ruin the young lawman by gossip, linking him with the shapely wife of another, before they went after him with guns

One Helluva Lawman

by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR

I

THE MAN from the hills was feeling good when he swaggered out of the saloon and went toward the hitchrail. He was drunk, but not too drunk; he had the satisfied air of a small man who'd spent enough money to make himself look big in his own estimation.

Jim Logan shoulder-nudged himself away from the wall where he had been waiting. "Jefford!" he called.

The little man stopped. His thin, wind-burned face came around and then his body followed with a catlike movement. "What you want with me, Sheriff?"

Logan smiled briefly. "I'm arresting you, Ab."

"On what charge?" Jefford fired the question with promptness which suggested he'd had it rehearsed and ready.

"Cattle-stealing."

"Why pick on me? You've got no proof—"

"All the proof I need, friend. You had help when you drove those Box L beeves over the mountains, but you're the one who collected the money from the cook at the mining camp. So you'll do, for now. Coming with me, Ab?"

"Hell, no!" Jefford's right shoulder dropped just perceptibly—always a danger sign—and his eyes took on a look of cornered truculence.

"All right," Logan said. He was a big, experienced man near thirty, easy-moving and unhurried about most things. His eyes were gray; and although they had seen a lot of the world's violence, in them was still retained a kindly understanding that was so much at variance with his gunfighter reputation that it was rarely noticed. Certainly Jefford wasn't seeing it now.

Keeping his thumbs hooked negligently on his cartridge belt, Logan added, "If you think you can beat me, Ab, go ahead and try. But you better be sure it's worth while. A little time in prison is better than getting a bullet in you, any way you look at it."

Jefford's whisky bravado wavered and fell away. Suddenly he reverted to what he was—one of the hill people, harried and cringing, a pitiable two-bit rustler who'd got caught. He lifted his hand to shoulder height.

"All right, all right!" he said hastily.

"Unbuckle your gun rig, Ab, and toss it to me."

JEFFORD unbuckled the rig, but didn't toss it. As a final gesture of defiance he let it drop to the worn planks of the saloon porch and gave it an angry kick. The rig spun around as it slid past Logan, fetching up against a post. The horses at the rail shied and jerked at their reins. Logan picked up the belt.

"Careful, ain't you?" Jefford leered in shaky fury. "You're no sheriff! Nothing but a damn gunman that happens to wear a badge!"

"That's what they hired me for, Ab. You know where the jail is. Start walking."

Jefford didn't start immediately. One of Trenna Pace's big freight wagons was rumbling through the town, the driver straddling one of the wheel mules and cracking his whip to swing the leaders into the wagon yard. As it passed, both Jefford and Logan saw that Ed Noon had ridden in and had paused in front of the hotel across the street, looking the town over in his wary way.

This was bad. The hill people were made up of two clans—the Jeffords and the Noons. Big families, both of them, with a lot of shirt-tail relatives. Big Ed Noon, a man of forty-odd, whose face was wreathed by a beard that was darkly red, was king up there in the hills.

He didn't come into town often. But now he'd had to come right at a time to see that Ab Jefford had been disarmed by the sheriff What Ed would do about that was the big question.

Logan watched Noon, without taking his attention entirely from his prisoner. Jefford sent the big bearded man a look of mute appeal. Noon lifted his broad body on his stirrups, staring across the street.

Then, abruptly, he reined his horse in among others at the hotel hitch-rail, dismounted, and tramped up the steps of the hostelry.

Sheriff Jim Logan was astonished. The hill people had always stuck together; they had to, living as they did. And now Ed Noon had deliberately turned his back on one of his own clan.

Logan was not a man to question his luck, however. He took Jefford to jail and locked him in a cell.

The prisoner gripped the bars and said in an unbelieving way, "Ed let it pass! Never did a damn thing to help me, never raised a finger! Well, you're gonna get yours anyhow, Lawdog, once Jake Bogard gets back here and finds out you been fooling around with his woman!"

"Shut up, Ab, and settle down in there. This jail's not such a bad place. It's clean, and the Chinese from the restaurant brings better grub than you're used to in the hills."

Logan tramped back along the corridor to his office and sat down at the desk. He spent twenty minutes making out the papers covering the arrest, then went out into the sunshine again, taking one copy of the papers down the street to the neat little house where

Judge Caster lived.

The judge wasn't at home, so Logan left the papers with Mrs. Caster, a prim little woman who regarded him with tight-lipped disapproval. Apparently she, too, had heard the gossip.

Leaving the judge's place, Logan dropped by the Mercantile, where he ordered a supply of groceries. While the storekeeper stuffed the goods into a flour sack the sheriff drifted over to a tiny table where toys for children were displayed. But dolls and lettered blocks didn't seem to fill the bill for what he had in mind. At another counter he picked up a bamboo fishing pole with a price to fit a lawman's purse, and some things to go with it. These he took over to the main counter.

The merchant put the sinkers, line and cork float into a paper bag and stuffed it into the grocery sack. He asked no questions about these odd purchases. A knowing smirk hovered about his mouth, though.

Everyone knew that Helen Bogard, pretty young wife of a man Logan had sent to prison six months ago had an eight-year-old son.

LOGAN was on his way back to his office, carrying the groceries and the bamboo fish pole when Trenna Pace crossed the street to stop him. Trenna was a lithe, long-striding young woman of twenty, one who accepted life as it was and made her way through its mazes with confident ease. Lately, though, she had taken to worrying.

"Jim," she said now breathlessly, "I saw the whole thing from the wagon yard. I'm afraid of that Ed Noon. It wasn't natural, his turning his back on Jefford! They must have something in mind, something big enough so that Ed didn't want to spoil it by making a fuss right now."

"Trenna, you worry too much," Logan said flatly.

"If that displeases you, I'm sorry," she told him. "I've enough trouble over there—" she tilted a somber glance toward the wagon yard, where a half-drunk teamster was belaboring a horse—"without worrying about you, too. But I can't help it."

"Don't worry about me, honey. I took a risky job with my eyes open. We've talked this out before."

"And got nowhere." She lifted her tanned face to give him a look of hurt and reproof. "Do you have to keep picking on the hill people?"

"Only when they keep getting out of line, as they've been doing lately. Trem Leland complained that somebody had taken all his cows. It was my job to track them down, so I did. Don't concern yourself, Trenna, about the doings of some two-bit cow thief."

"It's not just that one man, and you know it. It's all of them, up there in the hills. They were pushed out of the valley long ago, and they've eked out an existence in those barren hills as best they could, living on stolen beef, and hating. Now they're—"

"Trenna, you get downright poetic sometimes. I'm here to keep the lid on. It's as simple as that."

"Like on a kettle? Even if you hold it tight, though, the pressure keeps building up, doesn't it?"

Logan chuckled. Trenna Pace had inherited her father's freighting business. Not many women would have tried to run such a concern, but Trenna had done it and had made a go of it, actively managing the outfit. Her outlook on life was clear-eyed and penetrating. At times she seemed to see things a little *too* clearly; so often she was right.

"What do you want me to do?" Logan asked her. "Let them get away with a little stealing now and then to blow off steam?"

"There's such a thing as give and take—a little happiness for everyone. Or doesn't a lawman know about such matters?" A look of mocking mischief got into her brown eyes as she glanced down at the bamboo pole. "Going fishing, Sheriff Logan?"

"It's for Tommy Bogard. There aren't any kids out there for him to play with, and he needs something to occupy him."

"Groceries, too." Trenna craned a look at the flour sack which Logan had slung over one of his shoulders. "You're a strange sort of lawman, Jim. You've got everyone afraid of your gun, and yet when you send a man to prison you feel responsible for the welfare of his family."

"This is a special case. Mrs. Bogard and the kid haven't got a cent to live on. The human thing to do is help them a little."

"A lawman has no business trying to be human!" Trenna cried. "He can't afford to be, in country like this. But—she *is* pretty, isn't she?"

Logan groaned, "Trenna, it's not like you to pay attention to gossip."

"I'm sorry. That was catty of me, all right." Lifting herself on tiptoe she kissed him, lightly, on the cheek. "There. Now the town has seen that I still trust you, in spite of all the talk. You'd better hurry. Jake Bogard may come back to his little blonde doll any time, now that he has escaped from prison. You wouldn't want him to catch you out there. He'll probably pay a great deal more attention to the gossip than I have. Jim—"

HER hands gripped his arms with sudden and surprising strength. "Jim, let's leave this place. Now—today! I've told you that I'd marry you, so let's end this waiting. We can go somewhere else, find a little ranch and live like—"

"Why, honey!" Logan's puzzled exclamation stopped the rush of her words. "What are you talking about? Do you want to marry something that puts its tail between its legs and runs? Jake Bogard's a lightweight, and no particular danger to anybody. When he shows up here, if he does, I'll have to take him into custody and return him to prison, and that'll be that."

"It's not Jake Bogard I'm worrying about!" she insisted. Nor the rest of the hill people either, really. I—I just can't be logical about this, Jim, but I've got the strangest feeling that something is building up wrong here, for us. Just when you had everything quieted down, those Jeffords and the Noons started rustling on a big scale. They took every one of Trem Leland's cows, didn't they? It doesn't seem to make sense that they should cut loose like that after laying low for so many years, and at a time when business is good and everyone is making a little money. They've always slow-elked a beef now and then, for food, but that was the extent of it until now. There's something behind all this, something that does make sense, though I can't seem to get hold of it. It scares me, Jim."

"There you go, honey, getting mystic on me again. Want me to buy you a crystal ball?"

Logan went on talking for awhile, in his calm and steady way. That seemed to quiet her fears somewhat. When she turned to go back to her wagon yard she managed a farewell smile and a lame jibe about his persuasiveness with women.

Jim Logan did not guess it, but he was being watched from an upstairs window of the hotel while he got his horse from the livery and rode out of the town. The man who watched him was a man the town knew as Ira Keller, a plump, well-dressed individual with the marks of his years softened by prosperity and easy living. A bachelor, he spent most of his time here in the comfort of the hotel, though he owned a ranch that made him one of the Big Three in Durango Valley.

II

WATCHING Keller, while Keller watched the sheriff, Big Ed Noon thought that the man was typical of the Big Three. That heavy-jowled face was smugly predatory. No matter how much such men had, they always wanted more. They got so they lived for that, and not much else.

Letting the window curtain fall back into place, Keller turned to the others in the room. "He's going out to see the Bogard woman again, I would say. Those gunmen never can leave a pretty woman alone. Maybe its because they realize they'd better enjoy life while they can. At any rate, he's playing right into our hands. Bogard may take care of him for us."

Ed Noon looked at the other two men in the room, slyly measuring their reaction to this. One of them, Cline Durling, lolled in a big easy-chair, seemingly concerned with nothing more than seeing how long an ash he could retain on his cigar. Durling, a widower with no children, was the youngest of the Big Three; even so he was well past sixty. Big and impressive-looking, he main-

tained a flowing white mustache and a mane of snowy hair. He was widely known for the fast horses he bred as a side line. He cut quite a figure at race meets all over the West. In Durango Valley he was content to ride along on the steady prosperity Ira Keller's schemes brought to the Big Three.

The other member of the trio was wizened little Sam McKay, with the furrowed brow of a chronic worrier. Never at ease anywhere, McKay perched on his chair as if apprehensive that something or other might jump at him. Unlike the other two, McKay had a real family on his hands. His son had been killed in a drunken fall from a horse, and now McKay was trying to raise a bunch of wild young grandchildren whose mother had run off with another man.

Ed Noon chuckled to himself. He found amusement in being in this room where the air was fragrant with the aroma of Havana tobacco and fine whisky. The rough, red-bearded leader of the hill people, accepted more or less as an equal by the Big Three—that was something.

Only because they needed him, though. Noon was well aware of that. Exactly how much they needed him was something he would have given a good deal to know.

While Keller chose a chair and sat down, Durling regarded the inch-long ash now on his cigar with thoughtful concentration. "Could be, Ira," he commented. "Bogard will be shooting mad when he finds out his wife has been entertaining our good sheriff. Even Logan wouldn't be proof against a bullet in the back."

"Watch your talk," Sam McKay warned

Logan heard the spiteful sound of guns through the roaring flames

sharply, with a meaningful glance toward Ed Noon. "You too, Ira."

Noon failed to suppress his chuckle this time. His sardonic sense of humor dourly responded to this—the powerful, outwardly respectable Big Three, hoping for someone to remove from their path the sheriff whom they themselves had put into office. It was funny all right. The notion that weak, inept Jake Bogard might be capable of handling that hell-on-high-wheels lawman was funnier still.

Noon's smile was broad, and faintly mocking. "Don't mind me, boys," he commented. "I've got a tight mouth. Can't say I blame the sheriff for putting Jake out of his way. That Helen Bogard is really something. I wouldn't mind getting my hands on that little parcel myself."

Keller gave him a resentful glance, seeming to reprove him for blundering across some line of ethics. These respectable ones, Noon reflected sourly, had all sorts of rules of conduct and prim compunctions. But when it came to the big things they had none at all.

He said heavily, "Maybe Bogard won't come back here, though. If he don't, you boys needn't work around to the idea that we're going to shoot your sheriff for you. Some of us have seen how that feller can handle a gun. He's greased blue blazes, and he—"

"No one," Keller snapped, "has mentioned such a proposition."

"Nobody's mentioned a lot of things," Noon said, blandly mocking now, "that are plain to be seen. Right now I want to know just where we all stand. One of my boys—Ab Jefford—got caught. I seen the sheriff arresting him when I rode into town. What do you aim to do about that?"

KELLER retorted, "Nothing. We made no bargain to look after any of your flea-bitten crew who stumbles. You've got your work cut out for you, Noon. Keep at it, and don't come riding in here openly as you did today. Don't concern yourself about Logan. Bogard's escaping from prison is a lucky break, handed to us for free, but it's not the only string on our bow." Keller ignored Sam McKay's warning grunt, and went on, "Keep pecking away at the little outfits, keep Logan on the jump. You cleaned Leland the other night. Take Herb Sny next. Sny is tough, so you'd better hit him hard."

It did beat all, Noon reflected, the way people who felt secure in their strength sometimes got careless and said more than they might have intended to say. Keller had as good as admitted that the Big Three wanted Logan out of their way, and intended to have him killed.

Why? The answer to that seemed plain enough to Ed Noon. The whole history of Durango Valley pointed to it.

The Big Three had got here first, and had grabbed off for themselves the rich range of the upper valley. Smaller outfits had moved onto the remaining grass. Too many of them—which accounted for the way they had remained small, and for their quarrelsome bickering, besides.

The Jeffords and the Noons had been late comers to that lower range, at a time when there had been but little of it left. Kentuckians, they had turned naturally to hunting to feed heir families, but had found it easier to kill a neighbor's cow than to find a deer. For that they had been run out. A big ranch could spare a beef now and then, where a small one couldn't. They had found refuge in the hardscrabble hills where their womenfolk raised garden truck and chickens and the men still contrived to slow-elk a beef once in awhile.

Not Big Three beef, however. The hill people were wary of these outfits, with their big crews and their tough foremen. Like Keller's man, Bat Thaw.

It had been a miserable existence. The Big Three had made use of the animosity the hill people cherished, their hate for the "little" ranchers who had run them out of the valley. The proposition which had been thrown at Ed Noon had been bald and arrogant—and tempting. Fighting pay for every man who could ride a horse and carry a rifle. Hit the little outfits. Rustle them, hit them in any way at all, but run them out.

It had seemed hugely humorous to Noon at first, getting paid for evening an old score.

Then he had got to wondering—why?

His native shrewdness had helped him reason it out. The market for beef cattle had gone sky-high. The ten-dollar cow of a few years ago was now a hundred-dollar cow. The Big Three wanted more range, for more cattle, more profits. In this mountain country the only available range lay in the valley. They wanted all of it now. They wanted the little ranchers out.

There remained the sheriff, Jim Logan, who was all man. There was a wry joke in this, too. A couple of years back, when the beef market had begun moving up, a bunch of rustlers had come down out of Deer Creek Pass and started working here. Not men like the Jeffords and the Noons, who stole only to eat, but cold-blooded professionals who weren't awed by anything big and weren't particular whose cattle they took. The Big Three had been hit hard. Their crews had had no experience at fighting shadows.

They'd needed expert help and they'd got it. A man had been fetched in and swiftly "elected" sheriff, with residence requirements waived and told to go to work.

Jim Logan, one of a clan famous for law-enforcement work, was that man. He had done well, using a bunch of Big Three riders as deputies, trapping cattle thieves in batches. At that time Keller and his friends had wanted a first-rate lawman, and they'd got one.

HE WAS a little too good for them to handle now. And that was wryly funny too. In this world things had a way of switching themselves completely around. If Keller and the others wanted the whole valley—and Noon was pretty sure of his guess on that, having heard that they had tried without success to buy out some of the small ranch owners—they would have to get it by means that were nowise legal. Once the sheriff wised up to that, he would be a danger to them. Well, he couldn't be fired outright, but a bullet in the back would stop any man, even that one.

Noon didn't care about that, one way or another. He held a natural resentment against any lawman, but a sort of awed respect for Jim Logan, too. Noon's real concern was with the welfare of his hill people, and not much else. He got to his feet now, aware that the Big Three were scowling at his delay, and said:

"All right. We'll take care of Sny for you. But there's something else I better mention. We've talked things over amongst ourselves, and decided we want a little more money for taking our chances with tough roosters like Sny."

McKay started, giving Keller a look of stricken accusation. Durling's cigar lost its ash. Keller snapped, "Well?"

Noon's smile was intended to placate them. "We figure we got a right to some land. A place where we can grow money crops. We've got kids growing up, and we need valley land."

"You damned blackguard!" Keller exclaimed. A crafty look came into his eyes as he added, "No one said anything about the valley, Noon, at any time."

"Nobody needed to," Noon flung back boldly. "You fellers want range, a lot of it. Quick, while the beef market's still high. We don't need much ground for our crops, and it can be fenced off so's your stock can graze past us."

"You've been doing some guessing, eh?" Keller said. "Well, my friend, it's not going to get you anywhere at all."

"We'll see about that. You fellers have set something to rolling, I'd say you're going to have your hands full to keep it headed the way you want. It's cost you considerable already, money that you didn't spend just out of kindness to us hill folks."

"Blackmail," Keller said. "That's what this amounts to."

"Put any name to it you want." Noon had an edgy feeling that he was somehow losing control of this. "We're not exactly fools, up there in the hills. We can put two and two together."

"Ira," Sam McKay put in stridently, "I told you no good would come of dealing with—"

"Shut up, Sam." Keller sat back in his chair, smiling through the smoke of Durling's cigar. "Noon, I'll tell you straight out. Go to hell! Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Why, if word once got out that you'd sicked us on the little ranchers—"

"The word of some riffraff in the hills, against what we'll have to say? Everyone knows you're a bunch of haters up there, nursing your grudge against everybody in the lower valley. Try to tell people we had anything to do with your settling an old score, and they'll laugh at you. Can you show proof? Papers? Checks?"

Ed Noon was caught. Payment had always been cash in hand, with no witnesses to the transfer. He had underestimated these shrewd and bold old men. By speaking up too soon he had tipped his hand to them. He had spoiled everything.

Keller laughed shortly, clapped his hands to the arms of his chair and rose, saying, "Get out of here, Noon, and do as you've been told. Don't come here again. I'll meet you out in the hills as before. And don't try any more windy threats, my friend."

When Noon stumbled out of the room he was more angry with himself than with the Big Three. As he turned down the hall he almost collided with Tillie, the Negro chambermaid, who was mopping the floor. . . .

TOMMY BOGARD lugged a string of minnow-sized fish when he ran on dusty bare feet, into the shack where he lived. "Ma!" he yelled. "Hey, look't what me'n Mr. Jim caught in the crick!"

Mrs. Bogard had been visiting a neighbor when Logan had reached the Bogard place today. She was home now. She came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron, and ran her fingers briefly through her son's tousled hair.

"Why, they're fine, Tommy. Take them out on the back porch and put them in water so they'll keep for supper. And feed the chickens."

The boy ran from the room. When his energetic clanking of the well pump reached their ears Helen Bogard gestured to the sack of groceries Logan had left in one corner.

She said, "Take them back to the store, please. I—I can't accept any more help from you, Jim. I guess I've been a fool. I should have known there'd be talk."

"Talk," Logan said, "never hurt anybody."

"You don't really believe that. It gets people all fired up so they do crazy things. It causes most of the trouble in the world, I sometimes think. Take back the groceries, Jim."

"Helen, look. You've got the boy to think of. If your neighbors were any good they would have helped you long ago, but they didn't. What are you going to live on?"

"I—don't know," she admitted. "But I can't go on giving people something to chew on and magnify into the ugly gossip that I've found out has been going around. I don't know why I didn't suspect it before, when cowboys began coming here and . . . Well, they thought I was easy, because of the talk. I know that now."

"Some loose-jawed old woman," Logan said angrily, "has been working on you."

"It's only partly that. Jim, there's something else that . . . No, I can't tell you." She glanced up at his gaunt, strong-planed face. "You've been good to Tommy and me. Decent and kind. I'm deeply grateful, but it's got to end. Now."

Logan swore under his breath. A lawman saw the seamy side of things, like the effects upon an innocent woman and kid when their no-good man was taken from them. And that was hell on him, sometimes, if he owned a conscience.

III

A MAN was what Jim Logan was. Maybe that stemmed from the way he'd been raised. The Logans had always been a tightly-knit family, working together and playing together. Jim's father had been a frontier marshal, tough as need be and yet human. Jim's brothers, even now, were engaged in law work all over the West; but they kept in touch with one another.

There had been no real family life under Jake Bogard's roof, in spite of Helen's trying. Bogard had married on the strength of an inherited twenty-cow spread; bad luck and debts had whittled his herd away. Harried and troubled always, he'd been a poor husband to Helen, a poorer father to Tommy.

Finally, in need of money, he'd tried to rob the Durango bank and had botched that, too.

Logan had often wondered why the really beautiful girls of this world so frequently marry no-good men. Helen Bogard was beautiful all right. At thirty she retained a doll-like beauty; the lithe roundness of her body seemed to rebel against the restraint of the simple dresses she wore, so that her every movement was a challenge to the eyes of men. She couldn't help that—it was the way she was made. But it was one reason for the gossip, Logan thought. Folks refused to believe that she would stick loyally to the bad bargain she had made.

Helen Bogard was People, to Logan's way of thinking.

People . . . Some of them always got hurt when a lawman did his job. If he could convince himself that the innocent ones getting hurt was the criminal's fault and not his, he could coast along and make out fine. Somebody had to do the law's work.

Sometimes, though, he couldn't help thinking. Maybe that was why many lawmen were broody and mean.

Knowing no way to reason with Helen, Logan picked up the sack of grub and slung it over his shoulder. "I'll figure out some way, Helen. Trenna can bring the stuff out here."

"No. People would know that you're paying for it. Jim, I—" Her eyes filled with tears. "I've got to tell you. Jake is coming back here. He's—coming after you. Because of the talk. That's why he broke out of prison, I think. A man came by last night and said he'd camped with Jake up in the mountains. Jake has no horse and he's using the back-trails, but he should be here tonight. Oh, Jim, what will they do to him for breaking out?"

"Tack some more time onto his term, probably."

"He's got a gun, Jim—I found out that much. Don't let him find you. When he comes here I'll get the gun and throw it in the well. I couldn't stand having him kill you, and be hanged for it, just on account of lies about . . . Jim, I'll talk to him, make him understand how really fine you've been. He'll give himself up, then."

It sounded simple; too simple. It was based on a woman's hopes rather than on the harsh realities that determine the conduct of men.

When Logan left the Bogard place, with the sack of grub tied once more behind the cantle of the saddle, his mind was made up. He wasn't going to hide from Jake Bogard. In her concern for her husband, Helen had forgotten the danger to herself. A man like Jake might well be a wife-beater. If he had swallowed the gossip he wouldn't listen to her denials. He might even kill her, if he was permitted to reach her.

The whole thing was Jim Logan's fault. Maybe Trenna was right in saying a lawman couldn't afford to be human. Certainly Logan had made a bad mistake by trying to help Helen and the Bogard kid.

By getting up into the pass at once he could block Jake Bogard and take the man into custody before any harm was done.

Bogard was in the pass. Experienced in such matters, Logan could feel the man's presence, watchful and malignant, even though he couldn't see him.

IT WAS past midnight when Logan reached the narrow, cliff-walled gut of the pass. The ground was irregular here, studded with great boulders that had fallen from above. The trail snaked back and forth as it climbed the last steep pitch and leveled out in a brushy pocket at the top.

It was always windy up here. Hand on gun, Logan glanced around. The ashes of old campfires made grayish blotches in the moonlight, all of them placed where rocks or brush provided some shelter from the wind. Travelers often spent the night up here, since it was a long and risky ride down into the valley for a man who hit the pass of an evening.

There was no visible sign of life here now.

The click of a gun-hammer, sharply audible against the frosty sighing of the wind, slapped against Logan's ears. The sound was behind him. This would be a back shot, the thing that every lawman came to fear.

He reacted instantly and without any shred of hope that he would be swift enough. Roll-

ing out of saddle, he struck the ground heavily, drawn gun held out to avoid its being caught beneath him.

His startled horse shied away, snorting and pawing the ground. Logan rose to his knees, eyes searching for and finding the stocky figure of Jake Bogard.

The convict had risen up on the top of one of the boulders, after Logan had ridden past it. He was in a half-crouch, face pulled down low over his gun.

Now came the strange part of it. Logan was caught in the open, without protection. He needed time to swing his gun around and line it on Bogard. The convict had everything his own way; he had only to pull trigger. And yet he said, "Aw, *hell!*" and threw down his weapon.

Astonished. but warily suspicious still, Logan got to his feet. "Come down here, Jake!" he called.

The convict obeyed. He had got rid of his prison clothing somewhere, and in its stead wore a pair of bib overalls and a denim jacket which had been made for a bigger man. His bony, harried-looking face showed several days' growth of nondescript brown stubble.

"You could have shot me, Jake," Logan said.

"Yeah. When I saw you coming up I figured it was the best chance I'd ever get. I'd let you ride on by, then plug you in the back. Wasn't aiming to take chances with you any other way. It worked out fine. And I couldn't do it! Dammit to hell, I couldn't even do *that!*" Bogard's voice rose unsteadily. "You wife-stealing son, I've walked two hundred miles to get at you, and when I got my chance I—"

"Leave off that, Jake. Sit down."

Logan went over to the base of the rock on which Bogard had stood, found the dropped gun in the sand. It was an ancient, rusty thing, but was fully loaded. Shoving it under his belt he went back to his horse and got the sack of groceries. Firewood was scarce up here, but while Bogard watched in uncomprehending silence, Logan gathered a few sticks and made a fire, Indian-style.

"It takes a special kind of stuff, Jake, to shoot a man in the back. Not guts, exactly, at all." Logan put a can of beans against the fire. "You shouldn't have broken out of the pen."

"What else could I do?" Bogard was shaking violently now, with the reaction that often follows nervous tension. A spasm of rage overcame his weakness, so that his eyes held a baleful glitter in the firelight, and he seemed about to throw himself upon the lawman. "I found out about what's going on—a man in prison ain't as far out of the way as people think. It drove me crazy. Nobody can know what it's like for a man to be penned up while some dirty . . . Damn you, why didn't I shoot you? I took my chances for the sake of a crack at you. Went over the wall with the guards shooting at me like they would a rabbit. I got clear some way, and now—"

"Who told you, Jake?"

SWIFTLY, Bogard's mood changed to one of sly wisdom. "You're not going to find that out, lawman."

Logan had run up against this sort of thing before. Men who had lost the main chance often sought the satisfaction of gaining some pettty victory or other. He said, "What difference can it make, whether I know or not? I can't do anything to a person for just talking, even though he did hand you a tall one."

"Tall, is it?" Bogard was sullen now. "You been practically keeping her, haven't you? Two or three times a week you been going out there, fetching grub to her. Stayed pretty late sometimes, too—right under my roof! Damn her, I know what she's like when she's got a man handy." He lapsed into a fit of cursing. Then he said, "Don't think you can lie out of it, bucko. You was watched, more than once, by the neighbors."

Logan felt a stir of pity. He *had* stayed late at the Bogard shack, a time or two. He had been fascinated by the eagerness of a boy who was learning games that his father had never taken the time to teach him. There had been hungers in both of them. In Tommy, for the wisdom and companionship of a man. In Logan—well, that was harder to name. Maybe he'd been trying to fill a gap in his own life. He wanted a son.

He said now, "Think what you choose about me, Jake, but don't poison yourself with that kind of thinking about your wife. Not on mere hearsay. She's a fine woman, and the man who told you different was lying."

"Hell he was! Why should he do that? He was a drummer that had passed through here, and when he hit Canyon City he came to me and told me what he'd heard in the Durango saloons. Said he thought I ought to know, and he was damn well right."

The lie had originated farther back. Logan didn't argue about it, though. He was wondering why it was that some people found such malicious pleasure in prodding and observing the misery of others.

When the beans were hot enough Logan worried the can open with his jacknife. He whittled the end of a stick down flat and handed it to his prisoner. Using the stick for a spoon, Bogard ate with the eagerness of one half starved. When he had finished Logan stood up, saying:

"Start walking, Jake."

"Where are you takin' me?"

"Down to Durango. I'll have to send word to the authorities at Canyon City. They'll come after you. This will cost you about another five years of your life, Jake."

"Dammit, if I'd put lead in you when I had the chance—"

"The price of that," Logan said, "would be a rope. Don't people like you ever figure the cost of things before they try them?"

Bogard looked up at the gaunt, hardened lawman. "Think you're some kind of a god, don't you? Because you're the law, you can get away with anything. Well, I'm not back in Canyon City yet. I'm not going back. I'll get you some way, and next time I won't get squeamish."

"Shut up, Jake."

Riding slowly, with Bogard limping along on blistered feet ahead of him, Logan left the treacherous Deer Creek trail in the lower foothills and struck out toward a ranch. Reaching it, he awakened the owner and borrowed a horse and saddle for his prisoner.

They went along faster after that. They were riding over moonlit, rolling country when Logan suddenly reined up, speaking a command for Bogard to do likewise.

Far out across the range there was an ugly

GRAVE VOICE

A COWBOY was accustomed to walking through a rural cemetery as a short cut. One night he started through, unaware that a new grave, seven feet deep, had been dug in his path. He tumbled into the grave.

For almost an hour, he struggled to get out but finally gave up. He decided to settle in a corner until morning when he could call out and get some ranger to help him. He settled down for the night.

A gangly farmer, out on a possum hunt, came walking through the cemetery. He, too, fell into the grave. He began a desperate attempt to get out, unaware there was anyone else in the grave.

The first man listened to the farmer silently for a few minutes and then reached over in the pitch darkness and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You can't get out of here," he said.

But the farmer did!

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

---

glow of burning buildings. It was a trick of distance and light that Logan could make out even the shape of the blazing rafter-latticed roof, and still could not tell whose place was burning.

It seemed to be the Bogard place, though. The location of the fire was about right for that.

IV

THE TWO men rode as swiftly as their horses would carry them. When they neared the blaze Logan saw that it was not the Bogard place at all that was afire, but the one next to it. Herb Sny's ramshackle layout—house, barn and corrals—all were ablaze.

The spiteful sound of guns laced through the roar of the flames. Several saddled but riderless horses milled uncertainly in the red light some distance away. Tough, contentious old Herb Sny must have run out with a rifle which he had fired with accuracy enough to force the arsonists to take refuge behind some rocks.

He had them pinned down there. Eyes following the direction of their gun flashes, Logan saw answering shots stab down from the tower which supported Sny's water tank. A small, dark figure moved back and forth on the tank platform, shielded by the heavy tank itself. A crazy place to be, Logan thought, and yet it did give Sny a certain advantage. The tower was forty feet high. He could see well from up there, and could shoot downward.

Unlike many of the other small ranchers who did their work alone or with the help of grown sons, Sny employed a couple of cowhands. Logan wondered where they were now.

When a figure ran out to meet him and Bogard he thought at first it would be one of the cowhands. Then he saw that it was Mrs. Sny, a gray-haired haranguing woman.

"About time you got here!" she snapped. "They sneaked in on us. First thing we knew about it was when we woke up smelling smoke." She inspected Bogard's unimpressive figure with a single glance. Her sniff expressed disdain which was directed not toward the convict but toward the sheriff. "Well, aren't you going to do anything? Herbert is up there on the water tower. One of our hands ran off, and the other one is dead, I think. Anyway, he's lying out there by the bunkhouse where I couldn't get to him. Are you just going to sit there until my husband is dead, too?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not." Drawing his rifle from the saddle boot, Logan stepped down. "Do you know who those men are?"

The old woman swore at him, then, in a shaken voice. "Who would they be, except the Jeffords and the Noons? They've been rustling first one ranch and then another, and now they've done this. Everything Herbert and I have got, burned up!"

Logan pulled Bogard's gun from under his belt and handed it to the woman. "Watch the prisoner for me, Mrs. Sny." Then, at a crouching run, he moved forward.

Having the experienced gunfighter's contempt for the efficiency of hand guns in a long-range fight, Logan snapped his rifle to his shoulder and sent a wailing bullet over the heads of the men who crouched among the rocks.

They reacted instantly, scrambling around to put other rocks between themselves and this new danger. In doing that, some of them exposed themselves momentarily to Herb Sny. The rancher's voice lifted a fighting yell as he fired downward, shooting as fast as he could work the lever of his rifle.

A man leaped up among the rocks, made a gurgling scream, took a blindly stumbling run for a few yards, and fell. Logan swore. His job was to arrest those Kentuckians, not to kill them as they would force him to do if they were stirred up.

"Sny, damn you, hold off!" he shouted. "You boys on the ground, this is Jim Logan, and I've got you covered from—"

Lead snapped past him, snatching hotly at the sleeve of his shirt. There was no point in further talk, now.

The raiders split up, some of them making for their horses while others covered the retreat by concentrating their fire upon the sheriff. Logan dropped flat to the ground in a slight depression which gave him a little cover. He was aware, distantly, that Sny was fumbling with his rifle. Presently the

rancher flung it from him and backed from sight around the water tank. By his reckless shooting Sny had run himself out of shells, likely.

Jim Logan was alone in this now.

ODDLY, he felt the old, familiar thrill that always had come to him in times of danger. It seemed to be a mixture of things—fear, and the natural exultation of a man who overcame it and stood his ground. There was a predatory something in every man, and in a fight it would always come out. Everything was simple and clear-cut when it came down to killing a man before he killed you. If only the after-effects could be that simple!

The hill people had a mixed collection of fire-arms, as Logan had noticed long ago. Flintlock rifles, converted to use metallic ammunition in various odd calibers. Cast-off Army carbines that they had got hold of somewhere. One old Sharpes buffalo-gun—the weapon's deep boom reached through the chorus of the others.

The depression in which Logan lay prevented his getting a good view of his opponents. He lifted his head for a look, but at that moment a slug furrowed the ground just in front of him, throwing dirt into his eyes.

Blinded temporarily, he heard Sny shout with baffled rage. Then there was a drumming, swiftly retreating sound of many hooves. The hill people had all pulled back to their horses.

Their mocking yells drifted back. Then there was silence, except for the lessening sounds of the fires. Logan got his eyes cleared and moved toward the rocks.

The man whom Sny had shot was dead. He wasn't a man at all, really; hardly more than a kid, with long yellow hair and an immature face. Too bad, too damned bad.

Sny came up, saying petulantly, "You sure wasn't much help, Logan! If I hadn't run out of shells up there I'd have . . . What are you going to do about this? If you'd jailed that whole bunch, for stealing Trem Leland's cattle, they couldn't have done this to me. By hell, if you can't handle things we'll have to—"

"What I'm going to do about it is something I'll decide for myself," Logan said.

He was aware that he hadn't cut any heroic figure here. He hadn't wanted to. Law enforcement was a cold-blooded business. The lawman who played for the grandstand didn't get much else done. And didn't last long, generally.

"Well, you better clean out them hills!" Sny said angrily. "Else I'll do it myself! I've got neighbors that'll—"

"You and your neighbors," Logan said heavily, "couldn't agree on the time of day." He was thinking, with a deep anger, that he might have been able to accomplish something here if he hadn't gone off half-cocked and fired that first shot. And if Sny hadn't stirred up the Jefford-Noon clan at the wrong time. "Your missus was saying that one of your cowhands got shot. Lead me to him."

The blazing rafters of the bunkhouse collapsed, sending up a geyser of sparks into the night, just as Logan knelt at the downed man's side. The cowhand, an oldster by the name of Beal, was badly hit in the side, just above the waist. In the light of the fire a large area of his underwear was soaked with blood.

"Hitch up a wagon, Sny," Logan said. "I'll take him in to the doctor, and send out the undertaker for that kid you shot." Turning, he shouted, "Bogard!"

There wasn't any answer. Mrs. Sny came to the sheriff and handed him Bogard's gun. "He got away," she said.

She had let him go. The defiance in her old face told Logan that. She had been thinking about that gossip, taking it at its face value, and she'd felt sorry for a man she thought was a wronged husband.

LOGAN didn't say anything about that. Kneeling beside the wounded man he did what little he could to ease Beal's pain. When Sny fetched a team and wagon the two men lifted Beal into it. Logan walked out and got his horse. When he returned to the wagon the Snys were standing with their arms about one another while they looked at the mass of embers that had been their house.

"Better come into town with me, folks," he said gently.

"No," Sny blurted. "We been burned out, but we're staying right here. Come morning I'll round up my neighbors. When we hit that scum in the hills—"

"Don't take things into your own hands. It's the law's job."

"What law? A woman-chasing gunhand that the Big Three hired to do their chores for them?"

Logan let the insult pass. After fastening the reins of his horse to the back of the wagon he got onto the seat, saying, "I'll do everything I can. I'm sorry for you folks, truly sorry."

He didn't swing past the Bogard place. It wasn't likely that the convict would go there right away, since it would be the logical place for Logan to look for him. There were isolated canyons up in the hills, where a man could hole up in greater safety. Jim Logan, with a badly wounded man on his hands, had no time to search now.

When he drove the wagon into town he awakened Doc Treadwell and turned the wounded man over to him. After leaving the rig and the horses at the livery corral he tramped along the empty street to his office.

What he found there was a ruin. Desk, chairs, everything in the office had been chopped and mauled. The lamp was smashed, so Logan got a candle from a drawer and lighted it, and went back along the corridor.

The door of Ab Jefford's cell stood open. Its lock had been smashed by repeated blows of something heavy. An ax, probably; the same tool they had used on the office furniture.

Since there had been no other prisoners but Jefford, Logan could only guess at what had happened. But then, he didn't need to guess. He knew.

Going back to the office he put the candle on a shelf and looked around once more. The hill people were a clan, tightly knit, loyal to every member of their outfit. Things had been easy for them here, with the front door left unlocked so the Chinese could bring in food.

They hadn't needed to smash the place up, though. It seemed a senseless thing, on the fac of it. Now that thy had come to open warfare against the little ranchers, why go out of their way to pick trouble with the sheriff as well?

Hearing a step in the doorway, Logan turned quickly and saw Trenna Pace come into the room. She had thrown a wrapper loosely over her nightgown and she wore carpet slippers.

"Jim!" she cried, coming to him and putting her arms about him. "Oh, Jim, what's happened? I couldn't sleep after what happened here tonight, so I got up and sat by my window awhile. I saw a big fire out on the lower range."

"Herb Sny got burned out," Logan told her.

"Ed Noon and those others! They were here, too, as you can see. About midnight, I guess it was. They made a lot of noise. I went down and tried to get the storekeeper and the others, who were watching at a safe distance, to do something. Jim, they wouldn't do a thing. They said they weren't going to get shot doing the sheriff's work for him."

"They were right about that."

"They weren't! Something like this is everybody's business. Jim, this range is catching fire—I can feel it! Why should one man stand between these cowards and trouble that may engulf them all?"

"Fancy words, honey," Logan said. Tilting her face up with a crooked finger he kissed her lightly. "They pay me for doing that."

"There's not enough money in the world—"

HE HAD started to turn away. With surprising strength her arms swung him back to face her.

"Jim, I'm only human! I've waited a long time for just the man I want. He's here—he says he loves me, but he won't marry me!"

"Honey, I've told you how it is. This job's a risky one, one that might make you a widow. Once I get some money saved—"

"Money! I can sell the freight line any time, for enough to buy us that ranch we

both want, somewhere far away from this place. But your stubborn pride . . . Or is it that you're so toughened you can't really love?"

"Trenna, honey, don't hit me with that again. You know how much I want you."

"But *do you?*" She drew back a little, shaking her dark hair away from her face, and looked up at him with an odd intensity. "Jim, look at me." Her voice was a whisper now. "We can leave, and let these people tear one another apart in their own way. We can have our happiness . . . Jim, come with me to my room. Mrs. Ranson is asleep and won't hear us on the stairs. Then in the morning we can leave. That's my price, darling. We've got to leave here."

Logan looked at her in unbelief, his heart pounding. "Trenna, for God's sake! Don't sell yourself to any man—"

"Now I've shocked you, haven't I? Why do men expect a woman to be an icicle, afraid of everything until she's properly married? I'm a determined woman and I'm trying to keep the man I love from getting himself killed, that's all." She gave him a wispy, tremulous smile and pressed against him with undisguised desire. "You should know that there's a measure of hussy in every woman. You can have me now, tonight. I—I'm tired of being a lady, anyhow."

The planes of Logan's face composed themselves. No one would know what that cost him, with this lithe and beautiful woman, around whom he had built all his hopes, offering herself.

"Honey," he said brokenly, "don't make me kick my self-respect away. Don't turn me into a cur that runs out on his job."

V

CHANGES of mood always came abruptly to Trenna. That was one of the things that had fascinated him about her from the first. She could be gay and sad, taunting, and then distant, all in the space of a moment. Now she stepped back, wiping moisture from her eyes and saying:

"All right, Jim. I've made my try, and I've lost. I didn't play fair, did I? But I was scared—I still am. This ranch-burning . . . The hill people wouldn't cut loose like that unless they had good reason to believe they could get away with it. You're going to be one man against many. Jim, send for your brothers to help you. Please!"

"No, I'll not do that. The way things are moving now, I don't think they could get here in time to do me any good, anyway."

"Well, I've got some help for you, at least," Trenna told him triumphantly. A stranger came to see me today, asking for a job driving one of the wagons. He admitted he didn't have any experience as a teamster, though. He's worked for the law, mostly, he said, but had heard that there were no such jobs to be had here. He's . . . Well, he looks tough and capable. Jim, hire him as your deputy. Then at least you won't be alone."

"I'll have a talk with him," Logan promised. "Where is he putting up?"

"At the hotel. His name is Provo—he says that's the only one he owns. I'll have Tillie, the chambermaid, tell him to come see you the first thing in the morning."

Provo appeared on schedule, and he was tough-looking, all right. He was a barrel-chested little man who wore his hat tilted back from a dark, scarred, faintly insolent face. His gun rig was tied down to his thigh with a leather string.

He put one shoulder against the jamb of the law office doorway, with the bright morning sunlight back of him, and worked away at his teeth with a round-bone toothpick from the Chinese restaurant. He watched the sheriff for a time, during which Logan, busy trying to straighten up some of the ruin in the office, waited for him to speak.

Finally Logan asked, "Your name Provo?"

"That's right," said his early caller. "I was told you might have work for me."

"Might," Logan assented. "Come in and sit down. That chair over there beside you isn't broken up too badly. Ever work for the law?"

Provo sauntered in. "Plenty of times."

"Where?"

"Arizona, Wyoming . . . Hell, everywhere."

Provo offered no more than that. His manner said that he didn't much care whether he got the job or not. That was characteristic of a certain type. Logan had seen them before—the tough ones who sold their gun talents to the law. In some cases there was a streak of cruelty in them, he had often thought. Sometimes it took the shape of an outright lust to kill, an ugly urge that could be satisfied in complete safety behind a badge.

The law often had to make use of their kind, though. Logan made his decision, not liking it exactly. "You've got a horse?"

"Yeah, a good fast one."

"All right, I'll deputize you. We've got some rough work ahead of us. You'll draw seventy-five a month."

Provo looked over the toothpick. "That'll never make me rich."

"This isn't a rich county, friend," Logan said. "Want the job or not?"

"I reckon I'll give it a try."

"Keep one thing in mind, then. We're not in the killing business. We'll shoot if we have to, but we'll make our arrests without it if we can." Logan glanced down at Provo's well-filled cartridge belt. "You've got ammunition, I see."

"Yeah, plenty of shells."

IRA KELLER let the curtain drop back across the window of his room upstairs in the hotel. Rubbing his hands together, he turned back into the room.

"They just rode out of town, Sam," he said. "Our sheriff and his new deputy. Having Provo go after the job in that roundabout way worked beautifully. If he'd gone straight to Logan it might have aroused suspicions. We'll not have to worry about the sheriff any more."

"It's dangerous," McKay complained, "bringing in an outside gunhawk to kill the sheriff. He might even blackmail us later."

"How? We'll own the whole valley, by legal purchases of land. We control the judge. Who's there to be afraid of?"

"Well, if he talked—"

"To whom? Get that through your head, Sam. Provo will get the rest of his pay and drift, and that will be the end of it. Leave things to me and stop your worrying."

"I still don't like it. If we bought Logan off—"

"You don't buy off his stiff-backed kind. And he's one of those smart ones—he'd catch on to things sooner or later, and raise hell. I can judge men. Give me credit for that. We've got to adapt our thinking to new conditions. You want to be rich, really rich, don't you? Then hang tight, friend."

Cline Durling was not in the room today, having taken a brood mare over the mountains to a five-hundred-dollar stud. Sam McKay was lost against Keller's arguments. He drained his whisky glass and wiped his mouth.

"Once we've got the lower range, what then?" he asked. "How do we handle Ed Noon and his folks?"

Keller chuckled. "They'll have handled themselves by that time, friend. The facts will be plain—they made a lot of trouble, rustling and burning ranches, even killing our sheriff. Finally we respectable ranchers were forced to act, so we threw our crews together and wiped them out. That's the way it will look."

McKay's face got a little white. "Ira," he blurted, "you're pretty close to being loco!"

Keller let that pass. "It's beautiful, Sam, beautiful. Ed Noon will have done the work for us. We can run five thousand head of cattle apiece in the valley, and with beef prices high—"

A knock sounded on the door. Sam McKay jerked upright in his chair. Keller called, "Come in!"

Trem Leland, a middle-aged rancher from the lower valley, tramped into the room, twisting his sweat-stained hat in his hands.

"I've come to take that offer you made for my spread, Mr. Keller," he announced.

"Fine—fine," Keller said heartily. "Sit down, Leland. Have a drink. What made you change your mind?"

"Nothing else I could do. My cattle are gone and your bank won't give me credit to restock. Last night, Herb Sny got burned out. If that's the way things are going to go there's no chance for a little feller like me to stand up against the hill bunch. That offer you made was a slim one but I've got to take it."

Keller stifled an urge to send McKay a triumphant look. Suddenly aware of a furtive sound in the hall, he crossed silently to the door and flung it open.

But only the Negro chambermaid was in the hall, busily wielding a dust rag. . . .

Jim Logan made a wide swing into the lower valley, on his way to the hill country, in order to stop by the Bogard place. The door of the shack stood open, but no one responded to his call.

Disturbed, he dismounted and went into the house, glancing swiftly around for signs of struggle.

HE COULDN'T see anything of that sort. Frowning, he considered the possibility that Helen had been frightened by the fire at Herb Sny's place and had taken refuge with some other neighbor. He discarded that notion when his glance fell upon the oilcloth-covered table. Soiled dishes showed that one person had eaten a big meal there, and had drained a whisky bottle that now lay empty on its side.

So Jake had come here last night, after all! Helen had fed him. Then she and the boy must have left with him.

The temptation was to trail Bogard, for Helen's sake. But for the present Logan was going to have his hands full with Ed Noon's crowd. Too, the absence of signs of a struggle here indicated that Helen had gone with her husband willingly enough.

Stepping out into the sunlight again, Logan was aware of Provo's smirking regard. The deputy had heard the gossip, no doubt, in the saloons. Logan shrugged faintly and stepped into saddle.

Toward noon, the two men stopped to water their horses at a small creek. Bone-tired from the long ride, Logan got down, stretched, and strolled upstream a short distance, rounding a sharp bend of the stream. Taking off his hat and placing it on the grassy bank, he stretched out on his belly to drink.

A lawman's wariness becomes instinctive, ingrained, after awhile. Logan still was watchful even as his face neared the water. In its mirrorlike surface he glimpsed a reflection of movement near the horses, and the glint of sunlight upon metal.

He lifted his head swiftly. Provo had dismounted and was standing with boots apart, gun chopping down!

With one convulsive movement, Logan rolled over. At the same time he felt an impact that sent the breath gushing from his mouth. As if from a great distance he heard the crash of a gunshot.

Then his own gun was in his hand, swinging up, then down into line as the hammer came back. That much was automatic; done with the cold intentness of the trained gunfighter. The gun found its target, bucked violently in his hand.

Provo fired again, but his shot went wild. His knees were buckling and his body was spinning far around, and a look of amazement was on his face. There was finality in the way he fell.

In the sudden silence, Logan realized, after a time, that he was standing in the water. With gun uptilted, still watching Provo, he splashed to the shore.

Provo was dead when Logan reached him.

It was at times like this that Jim Logan knew the feeling an executioner must have. The feeling of being something unclean. Someone had to do the law's work, he knew, but always he asked himself, Did it have to be Jim Logan?

He had been headed into it by his upbringing and had set out to do a good job of it, regardless. But at no time had he even felt comfortable in doing it. When you came right down to it there seemed little difference between a gunhand in the hire of the law and one in the hire of someone else.

Self-defense should be an exception, he told himself, but he couldn't make the argument ring true. If he had been a man of peace, earning his living with some tool other than a gun, there would have been no reason for such an attack being made upon him.

It all boiled down to this—that every man put up a "front" for the world to see, and behind that front dwelt the real man. And the real Jim Logan was too kindly a man for the business he was in.

He was fed up with killings, legal or otherwise. He didn't want to play God. He wanted to live a simple, human sort of existence somewhere, with the woman of his choice.

He still was standing there when Trenna Pace galloped up on a lathered horse.

LOGAN looked at her in astonishment. "Trenna, what brings you—"

"Oh, Jim!" Dismounting, she flung herself into his arms. "When I heard about it I was terrified. I was the one who sent him to you—" She broke off, glancing down at the dead man.

"The crazy fool tried to shoot me," Logan said thickly. "I don't know what got into him. Some notion about wanting to brag that he'd beaten a fast gunhand, I guess."

"Jim, you're wounded! Oh, darling! . . . Here, sit down and let me look."

Logan had completely forgotten the bullet that had struck him. Now, while Trenna fussed over him, he felt along his back and found that the slug had cut a shallow path down one shoulder blade. The bone didn't seem to be broken.

"It doesn't amount to anything, honey," he said. "But how could you have heard of this, when it just now happened?"

"I thought you'd be going into the hill country, so I headed this way and found your trail. Then when I heard the shooting . . . But that's not what I meant by hearing of it. Jim, you're not going to believe what I've got to tell you, but it's the truth. Provo was hired to kill you!"

"I can believe that, all right," Logan told her. "Ed Noon acts tough, but when it comes to killing he'd—"

"No, not Ed Noon. He had nothing to do with Provo. That's the part that's going to startle you. Provo was working for the Big Three! For Durling and Keller and McKay."

"Honey, you're joking. Why would they—"

"Would I joke about a thing like that? Listen! Tillie, at the hotel, had already told me she'd seen Ed Noon visiting Keller in his room. That seemed so odd that I asked her to listen and see if she could hear what was said if he went in there again. He didn't, but she listened anyway. Today she got an earful. The Big Three are out to get the whole valley. They're already buying Trem Leland out. They're afraid of you, afraid you'll spoil their rotten schemes, so they sent Provo after you."

Logan moved his head from side to side. "That doesn't make sense. Those three old bucks are rich. Why would they take chances on—"

"That's just it! They're not taking any chances if they can help it. They're using the hill people to drive the little ranchers out for them. It's all so clear now, Jim. Can't you see it? They're rich, all right, but they want to be richer. Who doesn't? Jim, this is what I've been afraid of all along, without knowing exactly what it was. You've got to believe it, and act accordingly."

"Run, you mean?" Logan smiled crookedly.

"What else is there to do? You can't stand against the hill people and the Big Three too."

"You didn't just think all this up to make me run?"

Her small, lovely face whitened. "I had that coming, I guess. After—after last night. Jim, I'll never get over feeling cheap and ashamed. But I'm not lying to you. Believe that much good of me, please!"

"Trenna, I can't believe anything but good of you." Logan got to his feet and took her gently in his arms. "I'm the man who loves you, remember?"

"What *can* you do, except leave?" she asked tightly.

"Well," Logan said, "I can get mighty damn mad at the Big Three, for one thing."

VI

IN THE late afternoon, Logan and Trenna Pace rode into the town together, Logan leading Provo's horse with the dead man tied across the saddle. Trenna swung off into her wagon yard. Logan went on, walking his horse, passing the hotel where Ira Keller and Sam McKay sat in wicker chairs on the broad porch.

At sight of the dead man McKay started visibly, and flung a wordless, accusing look at Keller. That told Logan all he needed to know. Reining up, he called:

"What do you want done with him, boys?"

That was the front; the harsh, tough

front of a fighting man. Keller reacted guardedly, saying:

"I don't know what you mean, Sheriff. Who is he?"

"If you didn't get his name, you were careless. He didn't make a job of it, boys. Now he's dead, so I can't prove by him that you sent him after me, but I'll be getting other proof. You might as well know that I'm coming after you." Logan jogged his mount, rode on down the street to the undertaker's.

He was taking the horses across to the livery, a little later, when he encountered Trem Leland. The rancher approached him diffidently.

"Reckon I'll tell you good-by, Sheriff," he said. "Me and the Missus are pulling out. Sold our place to Ira Keller. Got about a tenth of what I had in it but that's better than nothing."

"Hell, Trem, you shouldn't have done that!" the sheriff protested. "Even though those miners had killed all your cattle for meat you could have made them pay, eventually."

"By taking them to court, yes," Leland said bitterly. "Justice is something you buy, and I couldn't afford the price. So I took the only way out. Herb Sny is making big talk about the hill people, trying to stir up a war. About all that would do would be to get a lot of folks killed. I don't want any part of it. I want to thank you, though, for trying to get my cattle back."

"Don't leave, Trem. Stick around awhile."

The rancher's gaze sharpened. "Why? What you getting at?"

"I can't say any more right now, Trem. Just stick, that's all."

Logan turned away and went on to the livery. He had been tight-mouthed with Leland, as a lawman should be. He hadn't been with Keller and McKay. In his anger, he had given them warning. A mistake.

They would know now that he was a real danger to them.

After leaving the horses at the livery, Logan stopped in at Doc Treadwell's office. When the curt little physician had finished dousing the lawman's wound with fiery disinfectant and had begun to bandage it. Logan asked, "How's Beal making out?"

"He'll pull through, barely," informed the medic. "Got him in the back room, there. Two gunshot cases and a ranch-burning inside of twenty-four hours. What's happening in this county, Sheriff?"

"Nothing much so far, compared to what's going to happen," Logan said cryptically.

When he reached his own office he sank into a chair. The tight bandage that now encircled his body interfered with his breathing. Irritably he shoved back his hat, clamped a hand over his eyes and, in the welcome darkness and quiet, tried to think things through.

There'd be no point in telling the Big Three to call off their dogs. If Trenna's information was correct—and everything, including the verified purchase of Trem Leland's ranch, indicated it was—they were greedy and ruthless old men who weren't going to be stopped by mere talk. They had kept carefully under cover until now. If Logan braced them again he would only get another bland denial that they knew what he was talking about.

If he found a way to force them into the open he would be in real trouble. Their big crews included a lot of tough hands who could be turned loose against him.

THE idea of appealing to the governor for help was a tempting one. Judge Caster could do that; he had the authority. But Caster was a heavy-drinking, weak old man who never forgot for a minute that he owed his job to the political influence of the Big Three. Their crews rolled up a lot of votes. Still, if definite evidence was placed in his hands, the judge would have to act.

The thing to do was get that evidence. Ed Noon could be forced to supply it, by the threat of a prison term for burning Sny's ranch. That sort of horse-trading was another of the things Logan didn't like about law enforcement work, but it was often necessary. The hill people had their hates but it wasnt' likely they were working for the Big Three for nothing. Proof that they were were being paid would be enough to collapse the Big Three's whole scheme.

Logan turned his head, uncovering his

eyes, when he heard a horse outside at the hitch-rack. Trenna Pace, still in her riding skirt, dismounted and strode into the office. Perching lithely on a corner of the tilted, ax-gouged desk she said, "Hello, mister."

Logan smiled up at her with narrowed eyes. "Now what?"

"I've got a scheme. A darn good one, too. I hear that Herb Sny has been trying to stir up the little ranchers, so I'm going to give that a real good shove. I'll get them all together in a meeting and tell them just what they're up against. I'm going to blow things right out into the open, so they'll know it's the Big Three and not the hill people that they—"

"Trenna, don't!" Logan groaned. "You can't go around accusing people like that, just on hearsay."

"The hell I can't!" Sometimes Trenna's talk was tinged with the profanity she heard from her teamsters. "I'm a woman and I don't have to go by your rules. I'm fighting for my man and I'll use any club I can lay hands on. Don't try to stop me, Jim—you don't own me yet." Laughing, she looked down at him tenderly, then sobered again. "Why shouldn't those bobtailed ranchers stand up for themselves a little? They were rough on the hill people when they ran them out. There's no reason you should sacrifice yourself for—"

"Honey, this is a business, a man's business. I've got to get evidence, so I'm going to get hold of Ed Noon and make him talk."

"If he doesn't put a bullet in your back first." She slid off the desk, giving him a bravely roguish smile that was hampered by the moisture in her dark eyes.

Logan didn't try to stop her. There wasn't any use. He knew of no way to silence a determined young woman.

At the door she paused, looking back.

"Jim," she said softly, "please be careful. For—for me."

Logan rested awhile, beginning to feel the effects of his wound now, then got his horse and rode out of town in the cool of the evening. He camped high in the hills that night, sleeping at a prudent distance from his fire. Next morning he rode into the little valley where the hill people now lived.

He rode openly, since there was no use trying to sneak into this place. He was somewhat surprised when no watchful guards rode out to stop him.

This valley was a place of squalid shacks, of discouraged-looking little cornfields, of children who played on bare ground where molting chickens scratched listlessly. Several hound dogs raced out, baying an alarm.

Some women emerged timidly from one of the shacks. Logan rode over to them, touched his hat, and asked, "Where are your menfolks?"

"They ain't here."

That sullenly defiant reply was the only one that would be given a man who wore a star on his shirt, Logan knew. He should have foreseen that Ed Noon would be sly enough to pull his men out of here and hole up somewhere, now that he had embarked on a dangerous course of action. Thanking the women, Logan rode away.

THE only thing left to do was scour this wide, tangled hill country. He spent the remainder of the day at it, picking up confused trail sign here and there, but finding nothing definite.

He was beginning to think that he had come on a fool's errand when he became aware that someone was following him.

It was late evening when that happened. A prickly feeling nudged along between his shoulder-blades and he turned quickly in saddle, looking back.

The man who was skylighted atop a ridge dug heels into the sides of his horse and rode on down at a gallop. . . .

The little ranch owners were gathered at Herb Sny's place, under a heat-killed tree near the ruins of the house. In the near-darkness one of them said:

"Well, now that we know how things really stack up, we're worse off than before. We can't fight the Big Three, and that's a fact. I say we better send somebody over the pass to telegraph the governor and demand martial law."

"No, don't do that yet," Trenna Pace objected. "Jim says we've got to have real proof to show, and he's trying to get it

from Ed Noon. If soldiers come in here the hill people will just disappear into the mountains where no one can find them, ever. Then we'll have nothing except our word against that of the Big Three."

Someone snickered. "Logan is not bothering Ed Noon much, is my guess. He'll be more interested in putting Jake Bogard out of the way again, so he can get back with his lady friend. We might's well write the sheriff off, and figure what to do for ourselves."

Trenna looked around, containing her anger. She had been too impulsive in calling this meeting, but she had done a lot of thinking since it had started. Jim had been right about many things. What she wanted now was to get these ranchers to back him solidly, not to go off half-cocked into a shooting scrape with the hill people and thus cut the ground from under him.

"You're all wrong about Jim Logan," she said firmly. "And about Helen Bogard, too. I'm Jim's woman, and I know."

A sneering laugh ran through the crowd. Trenna felt hotness rush to her face, but the lie hadn't helped a bit.

Someone said, "He's got you fooled, sister, but not us. Wonder how many women that young buck can handle?"

"Please!" Trenna cried. "Have a little faith in Jim, and don't do anything foolish. Get hold of all the guns you can, and stand ready. When he gets his evidence he'll need all the help you can give him."

The ranchers broke into a wordy jangle of argument. Some—the strident Herb Sny was among these—wanted to settle the score with the hill people first of all. Others wanted to go after the Big Three, but could offer no way in which this could be done. One man still held out for martial law.

Trem Leland was present at this meeting. Trenna drew him aside and talked to him, earnestly, and in a low voice, while the argument went on and on. Presently Leland nodded, turned to the crowd, and shouted a demand to be heard.

"I figure I've still got an interest in this valley," he said. "What Miss Pace has told us fits right in with something Jim Logan said to me yesterday. It was too bad I'd sold out to Keller, he said, and he advised me not to pull out right away but to stick around. Why would he say that, if he wasn't aiming to do something for us? It's common sense, ain't it, for us to help him any way we can? There's no use wasting what strength we've got on Noon's bunch. If we tie into the Big Three we'll get torn to pieces. As to martial law, Keller and them others would use their influence to block that. We'd have to have the evidence before we could ask for it anyhow. So all we can do is depend on Logan. If he needs help in getting Ed Noon and making him talk, let's help him."

The angry ranchers listened to Leland; he was one of them. The meeting broke up with some grumbling but with a general agreement to sit tight, to go back to guarding their ranches until Logan sent for them.

One of the ranchers, swinging into saddle to leave, shouted a sudden;

"Hey, you there! Who are—"

Whirling, Trenna saw the dark, crouching figure of a man who was scurrying silently away from the group. The man broke into a frantic run, not toward the partly burned corral fence where the horses were tied, but in the opposite direction.

VII

PULLING out a rifle, the rancher who had discovered the intruder shouted a command for the fleeing man to stop. The command was not obeyed. In the starlight Trenna saw the runner fling himself onto a horse which had stood among some bushes. The rancher fired a shot, but missed. The pound of swiftly retreating hooves drifted back mockingly. The fleeing rider topped a low rise and disappeared behind it.

The mounted rancher swore, angrily jacking a shell into the chamber of his Winchester.

"A damn spy, boys! Sneaked in close enough to hear all we said—I should have plugged him the minute I spotted him out there, heading in a direction none of us would go. Well, no use trying to catch him in this dark."

No use, Trenna thought despairingly. Now

the Big Three will know everything that is planned, everything Jim hopes to do!

Jim Logan was astonished when, in the faint light, he made out the beard-stubbled face of the man who had ridden toward him and now was dismounting without any show of hostility. The man was Jake Bogard.

The convict seemed to be unarmed. Reaching out a hand, Logan made sure there were no concealed weapons, and then holstered his own gun.

"Jake, what are you doing here?"

"Been looking for you. Rode all over creation, till I stopped by Noon's place for water and the women told me you'd been there. Picked up your trail after that, but you're a hard man to follow."

"Where are your wife and boy?"

"Went back to the ranch. When I first got there I had the idee of taking 'em back in the hills to a certain place where they'd be safe while I went after you. Helen let me have my way; I reckon she wanted the chance to talk to me, which she sure did. Then this morning she decided she had to go back home and take care of her chickens. Funny how women are about little things like that."

"You know what this is going to mean to you, Jake?" asked Logan. "I've got to take you in. Why did you do it?"

"Jim, I tell you that woman of mine lit into me." Bogard rubbed his jaw, making a thin, rueful grin in the near-darkness. "When the tongue-lashing was over I'd begun to savvy what a fool I'd been for breaking out of the pen. She made me see how things really had been, how you'd helped her and Tommy without—well, havin' anything else in mind. It was your teaching the kid to fish that convinced me, I reckon."

"Helen is a real wife to you, Jake," Logan said earnestly. "Don't be forgetting that again."

"I don't aim to. I've made a mess of things right down the line, and I feel low enough to crawl. Man that's had bad luck gets to thinking everybody in the world is rotten, and when somebody hands him the kind of gossip I heard he takes fire. Forgets, I guess, that there's still people like you around. But when she talked to me I got to remembering the way you fed me up in the pass, right after I'd come near to killing you. The decent way you treated me that other time, too. So—" Bogard shrugged—here I am, Jim."

Logan pushed back his hat. Bogard presented a knotty problem at the moment. It was a question of which of two things was the more important.

"Jake," he finally said, "I'm going to trust you. Go down to town and wait for me there. You can sleep in the jail—it's open."

"You're not taking me there?"

"I can't right now. I've got to get Ed Noon."

"For burnin' out the Snys? You going up there after him *alone?* Hell, you'll never get near to him."

"That's my worry, Jake."

THE convict hooked his thumbs in his overall bib, tilting a sly look along Logan's gaunt face. "Know where he's at?"

"No, but I'll keep looking till I find him."

"Time you do, you'll be dead. When them fellers see that star on you they'll cut you down before you get inside that canyon."

"Canyon? You know where they are?"

"Yeah. I spotted that place a long time ago, figured it might make a good hideout if ever I needed one. Box canyon, with water in it. I was headed there with Helen and the kid when I seen that Noon and his bunch had already gone in. So we turned around and went away from there.

"Where is this canyon?"

"Sheriff, I'm not going to tell you that."

Logan controlled a rising anger. "A minute ago you were repentant as hell, Jake. Now you've gone right back to—"

"Yeah, that's right." The convict had a lofty confidence that seemed strange in a man of his makeup. "I've got you by the short hair now, haven't I? Happens it's not my idee for you to go in there and get shot to pieces. You could never get near Ed Noon, let alone pry him away from them others. But I can. Jim, let me do it for you."

The thing was preposterous. It was against all the rules of law enforcement for an officer to trust a prisoner, an escaped con at that, in any way. And yet there had been

a strong tone of earnestness in Jake Bogard.

Logan peered at the man, trying to size him up in the light of this. The front that people put up for a lawman to see was a harsh one, generally, one that meant danger to him. Many lawmen never bothered to look for the man behind it. Maybe that was the difference between Jim Logan and others; he was always interested in people, in the reasons that drove them to do the things they did.

"Trying to buy your way out?" he asked. "That's no good, Jake. I haven't got authority to turn you loose on the strength of a promise to help me."

"I savvy that, all right. You was going to trust me to go down to Durango alone, though. I figure I owe you something, Jim. Ah, hell, it ain't just that alone. If I can swing this and the law takes it into account, maybe I can get back to my family a little sooner."

Bogard was being honest. If he had denied his hope Logan would have been suspicious. Too, there was the fact that Bogard had had his chance to shoot Logan in the back, and had thrown it away. There was something good in the man. Helen must have known that when she married him.

Logan asked, "How are you going to do it, Jake?"

"I figure it like this. Noon knows I'm on the dodge, an' he'll think I'm out to get you on account of that talk about you and my wife. All right, let him. I'll tell him I know where you are, but it'll be plain I've got no gun, and I'm not man enough to go after you alone. I'll bone him for help, making out I won't trust anybody but him. He hates all lawmen enough to go along with that. I'll lead him to a place where you'll be waiting, and from then on he's your turkey."

It might work. If Bogard hadn't lied about the character of that canyon it might be the only way of getting Noon out of there. Logan said, "I've got grub in my saddle-bags, Jake. We'll make a fire and get supper, while I think this over."

When they had drained the fire-blackened tin can in which Logan had made the coffee he said, "All right, Jake, it's a deal. Where will we meet?"

"Well, there's that flat-topped butte about ten miles north of here. Country's pretty open around there, so you'll be able to see us coming."

"Be careful, Jake. See that you bring him alone."

"He'll be alone, else I won't bring him."

"This could get you killed, Jake."

"Yeah, it could all right. Way things are with me, that wouldn't matter a hell of a lot . . . ."

FOR hours now, Jim Logan had been waiting at the butte. Bogard had left their camp at dawn, saying it would take him only a short while to reach the hideout canyon. Now it was getting into afternoon, with the sun laying its steady heat upon the land.

Something had gone wrong. Maybe it had been wrong from the beginning.

Logan was about to start his horse down from the butte, intending to begin a search for that canyon, when he saw dust in the distance. Not two riders, but one. Not heading toward the butte but passing it at a distance, swinging from the lower valley up toward the hills.

It was a woman. The rising afternoon wind caught her full skirts, sunlight glinted on blond hair. Helen Bogard.

He rode down then, and pounded swiftly toward her. When she saw him she reined up and waited.

"Helen," he demanded when he reached her, "What are you doing out here?"

"I—" She looked away. She was riding astride, since she owned no side-saddle. Pushing her hair back from her face in a distraught way she said: "Jim, I . . . They've got Tommy!"

Logan stiffened. "They? Who?"

"Keller. And McKay and Durling. They were at the house this morning, with that tough foreman of Keller's, Bat Thaw. They said you'd be up here somewhere, around the canyon that Jake showed to me. They said if I didn't—do as they said, they'd kill Tommy." She glanced back. "They're following me, to make sure—"

What was it you were to do?"

She gave him a mute glance before she said, "I—I was to find you. There's—that

old cabin on Horn Creek. I was to take you there with me." She covered her face with her hands. "Oh, I feel so ashamed! There wasn't any other way . . . Jim, what can we do?"

Logan's first impulse was to laugh. This business was low, cheap, childish. It was the doing of scared old men who at last had abandoned their careful pretense of respectability. They had gulped down the gossip about the young prison widow and the lawman who had sent her husband away. They were making use of it, they thought.

The thing had teeth in it, however. They wanted a whole valley badly enough to kill a sheriff for it. The life of a child wouldn't mean anything to them.

Logan remembered the cabin Helen mentioned. It had been built by a valley rancher who, crowded for range, once had tried to run cattle in those barren hills. It was in a pretty, little wooded gorge, a perfect place for an illicit tryst. Or a trap. The Big Three would have men staked out all around that cabin, now.

Logan had a feeling of being watched by distant eyes. He looked around but could see no one.

"We'll go to the cabin, Helen," he said. And when she gave him a swift, questioning glance he smiled to reassure her, adding, "It's the only thing we can do. We're being watched, probably with glasses. If we don't seem to do what they want . . . Well, we better make this look good." Ranging his horse close beside hers he took her in his arms and kissed her.

He made the kiss a long and ardent one. Helen Bogard made no resistance. When it ended she said in a whisper:

"Jim, you've done so much for us— But you mustn't do this. They're setting a trap for you—that must be it. As soon as I agreed to do what they said I heard Keller tell Bat Thaw to start riding, and Bat left."

"Yeah," Logan said, "it'll be a trap, all right. We'll have to see who gets his foot caught in it."

HORN CREEK was far back in the hills, where a trickle of water flowed down from higher peaks beyond. The water attracted birds, which now were singing stridently in the trees along the bottom of the gorge and in the brush that cloaked the steep slopes.

Logan moved silently through the brush, in the unhurried Indian way his father had taught him. The cabin had a run-down, deserted look. Logan picked up a small pebble and tossed it downward. It struck one of the trees, breaking off a twig that fell into the water. A jay screeched in quarrelsome protest, flapping upward from the tree.

Instantly a voice demanded, "What'n hell did that?"

"Just some damn bird," a man jeered from the opposite side of the gorge. "What's the matter, Al? You got the jumps?"

"When we hear a horse coming, that'll be it," a third voice put in from near the cabin. "You boys keep quiet."

Three of them. There might be more. Logan had to take his chances on that. With the positions of the three fixed in his mind he moved along the slope, Indian-quiet.

The first man was easy. Logan smelled the drifting smoke of a cigarette and was guided by it through the brush. The man was sitting on a low juniper limb, a rifle standing against the trunk of the tree within reach. He was entirely unaware of the lawman's slow approach to his back. The heavy barrel of Logan's gun thudded down.

The man gave a low groan and rolled to one side. Logan caught him, lowered him noiselessly to the ground. One of Keller's Diamond K. punchers.

VIII

ONE down. Two more to go, at least. The rest of this would have to be done swiftly, before this one regained consciousness and raised an alarm. Having little faith in the efficiency of gags—after all, a man who was permitted to breathe could always make considerable noise by trumpeting through his nose—Logan meerly took the puncher's six-gun and rifle, hid them in the brush some distance away, and went on.

The man on the opposite side of the gorge wasn't easy at all. He had Indian blood in him; or at any rate he had an Indian's

awareness of all that went on around him. He was sitting on a rock with his hat placed upside-down in front of him, languidly flipping greasy playing cards into it. He spun to his feet as Logan approached, dark face gaping in astonishment and fear, and reached for the rifle on the ground beside him. That move was brought to a stunned halt by the chopping downward swing of Logan's sixgun.

The man's hoarse, wordless outcry was brought to an end too; but the harm had been done by then.

"Al!" shouted the man by the shack. What's going on up there?"

Logan didn't answer. Trying to imitate another man's voice was a risky matter at best, even when you knew him well. Peering down toward the shack, Logan glimpsed the third man moving through the brush, coming up slope carefully.

The temptation was to shoot. But a shot would be heard, and Logan wasn't ready for that yet. It would spoil everything he had in mind. This part of it had to be done without gunfire.

Logan stepped away from the unconscious Al, thrust himself edgewise into thick, concealing brush, and waited.

Time dragged by. The twittering of the birds was a loud, seemingly unnatural sound against the heat-filled silence. The man who was coming up the slope didn't call out again. Noiseless as a cat, he appeared at the edge of the little open space where Al lay. He stopped there, sixgun in hand.

He was Bat Thaw, ramrod of Keller's Diamond K outfit. Most big crews included a few tough hands. Keller's had more than its share of them, so a foreman like Bat Thaw was needed to handle them. A compactly built man, gray at the temples, he had more the look of a professional gunhand than of a working cattleman.

Thaw's deep-set eyes regarded the crumpled body of his rider for only an instant. Then they began moving back and forth in wider and wider sweeps, scanning the brush. At last, his searching having failed to penetrate Logan's hiding place, he moved into the open.

Logan waited until Thaw was just past him, then propelled himself forward.

He moved too swiftly. The brush made a hissing sound as his body passed through it. Thaw heard the warning, whirled around.

Logan struck down with his gun, and missed. Thaw had jerked to one side with uncanny quickness, so that the barrel of the gun merely glanced off the man's shoulder. Now the foreman was bringing his own weapon up, at belly-range.

Logan's free hand found it, clamped about it just as the hammer fell. The firing nib dug deeply into his flesh, but the shot was blocked.

Thaw grunted with rage, tried to wrench the weapon free, fending off the second swing of Logan's gun with one massive arm. He struck at Logan with a balled fist. They strained against one another, two powerful men who fought in complete silence.

Thaw was hard to handle. His stocky body seemed a mass of muscle, explosive with vigor. He twisted, setting his boots firmly on the ground, and struck at Logan's head.

EARS ringing, Logan felt his knees buckle. Thaw was getting away from him, stepping back, grinning in a humorless way as he lifted his gun, recocked it and let it fall into aim. Logan tried to lift his own weapon, knowing that he would be too slow.

Another figure darted into the uptilted, queerly swaying world of Logan's vision. Helen Bogard, fastening herself upon Thaw's gun arm.

Thaw swore at her, flung her away. But the brief interruption had been enough. Logan was upon him, gun-barrel stroking swiftly down. Thaw took a tottering step and fell, heavily.

Logan breathed air deep into his lungs. Helen had fallen across the unconscious Al and now she was righting herself, pushing her skirts down about her legs. Logan helped her to her feet, saying, "You should have stayed in that side-gully where I left you."

"I—thought I might be able to help."

"You helped, all right," Logan admitted. He glanced around, listening. "No more of them, I guess. They figured three would be enough to handle the job. Well, I've got to get them out of here and tie them up

somewhere far enough away that they can't be heard. The first one will be waking up any minute."

"He won't do anything. After you left him I tied his hands and feet behind him, with his belt."

"Good girl." Logan picked up Thaw's gun from the ground, then removed the foreman's belt and tied Thaw's hands with it. After doing the same thing with Al, Logan sat down, feeling of his jaw to see if Thaw's blow had broken it. It wasn't broken, he thought, but it was going to be sore as hell for a few days. The blow had caught him below and in front of the ear, at a crazy angle. He rested, waiting for his prisoners to regain consciousness.

Thaw came around first. He gave Logan a look of sullen hate.

"Well, you got away with it, so far. What does that buy you?"

"A little fun with your boss and his friends, when they get here.

Thaw lifted his head, drawing a noisy breath and opening his mouth.

"Go ahead and yell," Logan invited. "A voice doesn't carry like a gunshot does. By the time they're close enough to this place to hear you, you'll be a long way up the canyon."

"They're not coming here," Thaw growled.

"So? Don't bet on that, Bat. They'll be mighty curious to know what's happened."

"You always was so damn smart and high-handed, Logan. What right you got to shove us around? If you've got anything to charge us with, you've got to take us down to jail."

"I make my own jails, friend. Attempted murder will do for a charge. You were all set for it, weren't you? Was Keller giving you extra pay for this chore?"

"I'm not saying a thing." Thaw glanced toward his rider, who was stirring now. "Al, you keep quiet."

Logan rose to his feet. "Get up, boys. You and your friend over on the other side are going to take a long walk. . . ."

When Logan returned to the Horn Creek cabin, about an hour later, Helen Bogard still was with him. They had used some old ropes she had found in the shack, to tie the Diamond K riders to distant trees.

No one had come to the shack during their absence. Logan glanced briefly inside it, then looked down the gorge.

Helen's face had a strained, feverish tightness. "Jim, do you think Tommy—" She couldn't finish it.

"Try not to worry," he told her gently. "The more time Keller and the others have to think it over, the more likely it is they'll realize they've done a crazy thing. They'll not harm him, I think. At least we've given them no excuse so far. This, now, ought to make them think everything is fine."

DRAWING his sixgun he fired two closely spaced shots into the air.

"They'll want to make certain the job is done, though," he said, as he holstered the weapon. "They've got too much at stake to take any chances."

"Maybe they'll send someone else in," Helen interrupted.

"Might. I doubt it, though. If they'd had any more of their tough hands around here they'd have been helping Bat."

"Perhaps they've got some sort of signal arranged. Shots, to tell them everything is safe."

Logan grinned at her briefly. "Women sure are hell for borrowing worries. Begging pardon, ma'am, for the language."

"Well, I . . . If they do come here, what then?"

"Why, then I'll arrest three respectable citizens on charges that ought to make folks sit up and take notice." Logan began reloading his gun.

Helen's eyes held to his face as if she were trying to absorb some of his easy, hard-shelled confidence. "Jim," she asked finally, "did Jake find you? He was going to give himself up. I—I drove him to that, I guess. It seemed the only thing."

"He found me, yeah." Logan didn't tell her anything more, not wanting to add to her worries by getting her concerned about her husband's safety. He himself was doing some wondering about what had happened to Jake Bogard, but first things had to come

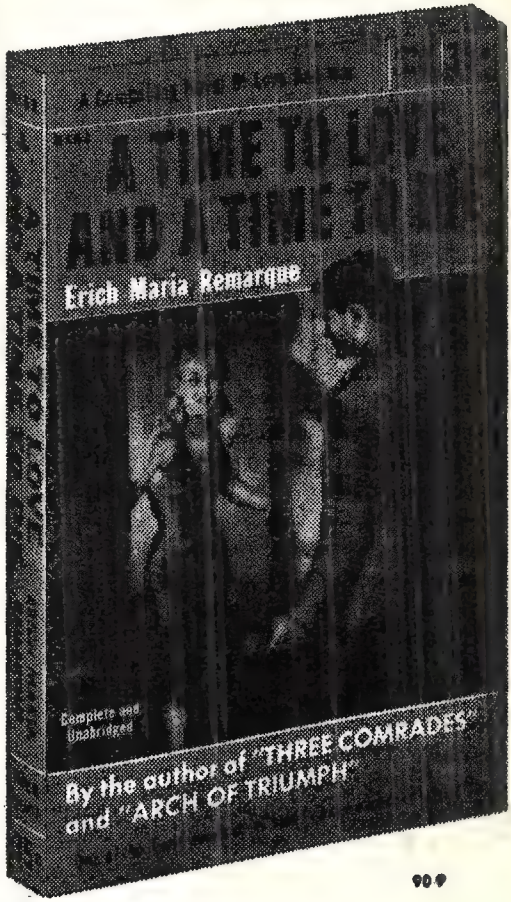
(Turn to Page 74)

"A powerful book, meaningful, profoundly moving."
—BOSTON HERALD

Now on sale in a new
POPULAR LIBRARY
pocket-size edition...

Erich Maria Remarque's

A TIME TO LOVE AND A TIME TO DIE



A Book-of-the-Month Club selection

This bestselling book, by the internationally famed author of THREE COMRADES and ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT, has been called "the most beautiful novel of love and war ever published!"

Buy it today at your favorite pocketbook dealer.

first. With forced lightness he said, "This is kind of a joke, isn't it? The Big Three set a trap and now it's switched around, all set for them. Get out back of the cabin, Helen, and hide in that draw where Bat and the others left their horses. Stay there, no matter what happens."

Things had gone mighty well for Jim Logan. It gave him an uneasy feeling, although he was not a man who paid much attention to hunches. He had simply learned that when your luck is running smoothly, that is the time to watch out for a sudden change.

Everything went wrong for him now.

He heard the sound of horses coming up the gorge at a hesitant pace. A voice called, "Bat?" And then, after an interval, "Bat Thaw! Where are you, Bat?" Ira Keller's voice.

Logan made no sound. He was a hundred yards downstream from the cabin, stationed on one slope with a shoulder lightly touching the bole of a tree, gun uptilted in his hand.

"Ira, I don't like—" another voice began.

"Stop your damned whining, Sam! There's nothing to worry about. Bat and those other two can handle any one man, any time. Maybe they ran him a little for sport. Well, the woman will know what's happened. Come on."

They rode slowly into view, the three of them. No, four, for Tommy Bogard was perched at the front of Durling's saddle, held there by the rancher's left arm. The boy's unbarbered tow hair straggled over his eyes. They were wide and solemn.

Logan waited until they were directly below him, and then called:

"Sit quiet down there. You're in real deep this time, old men."

Their heads jerked around, sagged by the weight of sudden dismay. Faced by what must have seemed to them an impossibility, they sat like statues.

The kid reacted first. He was like a bundle of suddenly-released springs, squirming free of Durling, dropping to the ground and scrambling up the slope toward Logan.

Ira Keller flung aside the expensive leather spyglass case he was carrying, and reached for the stock of the rifle that rode in his saddle-boot. Swiftly changing his mind, he let go of the rifle and wheeled his horse around suddenly so it collided with the others. Sam McKay, who had lifted his hands, was unseated by the impact, falling to the ground. Durling, a better rider, kept his balance, lifting a sixgun and firing at Logan.

THE bullet snapped past Logan's head. He ducked instinctively, trying to steady his own gun on the men below, baffled by the dust and confusion down there. And now Tommy was in his line of fire; scrambling upslope, the kid got directly in the way. Keller and Durling spurred back the way they had come, disappearing into the brush.

Logan had handled three tough ones today, yet he had failed with three old men. He had thought they'd be easy, but they were not. They still retained a measure of toughness from the old days in which they had picked the range they wanted and had driven all others away from it.

There wasn't any fight in Sam McKay, however. He had lost his sixgun in the fall, and now as he got to his feet unsteadily he said:

"I'm your prisoner, Sheriff. I'm not making any—"

"I can see that," Logan said, putting an arm across Tommy's shoulders when the kid reached him. "Come up here, Sam."

Holding his hands at a ridiculous height, McKay stumbled up the slope. Helen Bogard came running from the direction of the cabin, caught Tommy in her arms, and started to cry.

IX

McKAY'S horse, Logan noticed now, carried no rifle boot. Keller and Durling both had rifles, though, and might choose to make use of them now. With the presence of the woman and the boy to worry him, Logan said, "Get into the cabin, you folks. Come on, now, hurry."

He hurried them along, reaching the cabin just as the crash of rifle fire shattered the quiet of the gorge. The two cattlemen had climbed high on one side of the ravine and

were raking it with their shots.

Logan darted into the cabin after the others. He had thought he was being clever, having himself a time playing Indian and switching things around for the Big Three. He hadn't been smart at all. He had left his own rifle in the side gully with his horse, and he had left the rifles of the Diamond K hands lying around.

He hadn't been counting on anything like this.

At the moment he needed one of those rifles badly, since Keller and Durling were beyond sixgun range. Stepping back to the doorway of the cabin he looked outside, measuring the chances he'd have to take in making a rush for the brush.

Instantly, a slug exploded a small crater in the dirt beside the step. Another struck the door jamb at Logan's side. The two cattlemen had spotted him.

He backed inside and closed the heavy door.

Helen Bogard was shielding Tommy with her body. McKay still was holding his hands up.

Logan said irritably, "Put them down, Sam."

Obeying, McKay complained, "I told Ira I didn't like this at all. I wanted to turn the kid loose, once matters had swung the way Ira wanted them, but he said no, that the kid was old enough to understand things and might talk. What happened up here, anyway? Bat Thaw wouldn't just back out on—"

"Never mind, Sam." Logan was glancing around the gloomy interior of the cabin. There was a rusty stove, a bunk filled with ancient straw, a table fashioned from boxwood. The glass had been broken from the two little windows long since. A bullet reached through one of the walls, leaving a bright pattern of splinters thrust out from the wood.

"Helen, get behind the stove," Logan said, adding, with a wry grin, "It was my foot that got caught, after all."

A shout came to his ears from somewhere behind the cabin. "Ease off a minute, boss! We're down here—give us time to get our Winchesters!"

Bat Thaw's bawling arrogant yell. Those old ropes hadn't been strong enough.

Logan darted from one to the other, peering out, eyes searching the brush for movement. He could hear the Diamond K men working their way through, in the waiting silence that descended upon the gorge, but he couldn't see them.

Presently Thaw shouted again: "All right, now—we'll take him, Ira! We'll fire the damn shack. That'll fetch him out!"

"There's a woman in here, you fools!" Logan shouted.

Glancing around in the gloom, Logan sent his silent question to Helen. She shook her head firmly. Letting that go for the present, Logan turned to Sam McKay.

"Ira won't listen to anything. He's gone loco, I think. Time and again I've told him I wanted out, but I owe him money and he wouldn't let me."

"A crazy man," Logan said harshly, "can raise a lot of hell."

All of them, here in the cabin, wanted out. There was no way for them to get out. A smart-aleck lawman who had bungled everything had got them into this.

LOGAN looked outside again. There was a small cleared space around the cabin, covered only with a knee-high stand of dead dry weeds that would make a good fire. The worst part of it was that one of the windows was in the front of the structure near the door, while the other was in one end. That left one end and a blind side. He went over to them and kicked at the boards which blocked his view of what might be happening outside. The boards still were sound; the nails which fastened them had rusted solidly into place.

Gunfire laced suddenly through a wall. Bat and the others were trying to pin Logan down in here now, so that one of them could move in, pile weeds against the cabin and start the fire.

"Keep down!" Logan said to McKay and the woman. "Keep—"

The bullet struck him, then. Its blow seemed to reach out of nowhere, spinning him violently around and slamming him against the bunk. He fell partly into it,

robbed of all control of himself. When the red haze of shock cleared somewhat from his eyes he saw that Helen and McKay were bending over him, trying to help him.

He shoved them away, lurched over to a window and thrust his gun out through it. Sunlight glinted briefly on the barrel of a rifle amid some brush twenty yards distant. He drove a shot into that brush. Sudden squalling movement inside it told him he hadn't missed.

Gunfire seemed suddenly to fill the whole gorge. Keller and Durling were shooting again, for what reason Logan couldn't see. They were standing up on their high vantage point, swinging their rifles as they fired down into the trees in a steady progression that moved toward the cabin. It seemed such a waste of lead. . . .

Then the reason for it burst into view. Jake Bogard. The convict was on a lathered horse and he had a sixgun with which he was firing past the shack, no doubt toward the Diamond K hands who were rolling up weeds.

A crazy thing to do, Logan's mind decided with a detached, leaden slowness. Man couldn't hit anything, shooting from the back of a running horse.

He was aware of Helen's piercing scream, close behind him. Bogard had been hit, was spilling from his saddle while his horse swerved away with foamy mouth chewing at the bridle bit.

Bogard struck the ground, rolled over and over in a cloud of dust. He wasn't dead. He was trying to crawl toward the shack. Got to help him, Logan thought, and became aware that Helen was flinging open the door, running out into the open.

Logan got as far as the door, when he saw other riders come into view beneath the trees. Herb Sny and Trem Leland and several more. Little ranchers. Quarrelsome little. . . .

The gorge and everything in it seemed to recede from Logan's vision. His knees were buckling. He pitched forward and down. Down and down, into empty blackness. . . .

The lamp wick needed trimming. It burned high on one side, smoking the chimney. The flame swam gradually into focus for Logan's eyes and he stared at it fixedly, trying to fasten himself to something that had reality.

A hand pushed him back down to his pillow. "Darling, lie still," a voice commanded. "You must be quiet. The bullet is out, and Doc says you'll be all right if I can keep you from threshing around."

Trenna Pace's voice, soft and full of concern. Her face came into clarity and Logan lifted a hand to touch it, marveling at its smooth softness.

This was Doc Treadwell's back room. Frank Beal, on the other cot, was propped up on an elbow, watching.

"Trenna," Logan said, "what happened?"

TRENNA said, "Plenty, mister. And more is happening all the time. Jake didn't have any luck with Ed Noon. Ed thought he was trying to lead him into a trap of some kind. Finally Jake gave it up, and went looking for you, and couldn't find you. He did some tracking, though, and that led him to Horn Creek. Meanwhile I'd been doing some scouting around and I'd seen Helen riding toward the hills with the Big Three following her, one of them carrying her boy. I knew something was up, so I got the little ranchers together and trailed them. We got to Horn Creek just after Jake did. Jake is next door now, along with some others. Doc is using that house too, as sort of a hospital. He says Jake will live, though he may have one short leg for the rest of his life. Helen and Tommy are with him."

"Trenna, you sure do jump from one thing to another. Jake had a gun. Where'd he get it?"

"He found it lying on the trail, at Horn Creek. Sam McKay had lost it there, when he fell off his horse. Judge Caster is scared, afraid he'll be connected with what's happened, so he's bending over backward trying to do what's right. He's even given up the booze, so he'll be sure he doesn't make a mistake. He sent a message to tell the governor what Jake did and ask for a pardon for him. Keller and Durling are in jail. We're letting them buy their way out by selling their ranches at token prices, on

time, to an association the little ranchers have formed. That's not exactly legal, but by damn, I think it's right."

"Trenna, you're sure pretty when you're cussing something. Where's Ed Noon?"

"Up in that canyon where he hid himself. For the first time in their lives the little ranchers are pulling together, and they've got him and his clan bottled up proper. We've offered Noon a deal—if they build Herb Sny a new house and barn, with lumber McKay has offered to buy, they can have enough bottom land to raise crops. Nobody *wants* to be bad, Jim. It's just that when they're hungry and feel cornered—"

"Has Ed Noon agreed to that deal?"

"He will. The Jeffords and the Noons can't get out of that canyon, and their womenfolks are working on them now, making them see that they've got to settle down and live like other people."

Logan closed his eyes, thinking that a fort could always be a prison as well. "You're a great little fixer, Trenna."

"Aren't I, though? I can fix any damn thing at all, except the one big important thing."

Logan opened his eyes and saw that her soft lips were trembling. "What's that, honey?"

"Me and my man. He's married to a dog-goned job."

Logan got an arm about her. "Honey, I've been holding out on you. We'll have to stay around here awhile, till things are straightened out; but then . . . Well, I've got some money saved. Not as much as I wanted, for a big impressive ranch. I'll settle for a smaller one now, one that'll give me more time with my wife."

"I'll be right there, mister," Trenna said. "Always."

Get Your Copy of—

THE GALA 1956 EDITION

of

TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

●

Featuring the Best of the West

An Exciting Novel: WEST OF THE TULAROSA by Jim Mayo

Stories by Louis L'Amour, Joseph Chadwick, Philip Ketchum and others

●

NOW ON SALE—ONLY 25c AT ALL STANDS!

Last of the LONG S

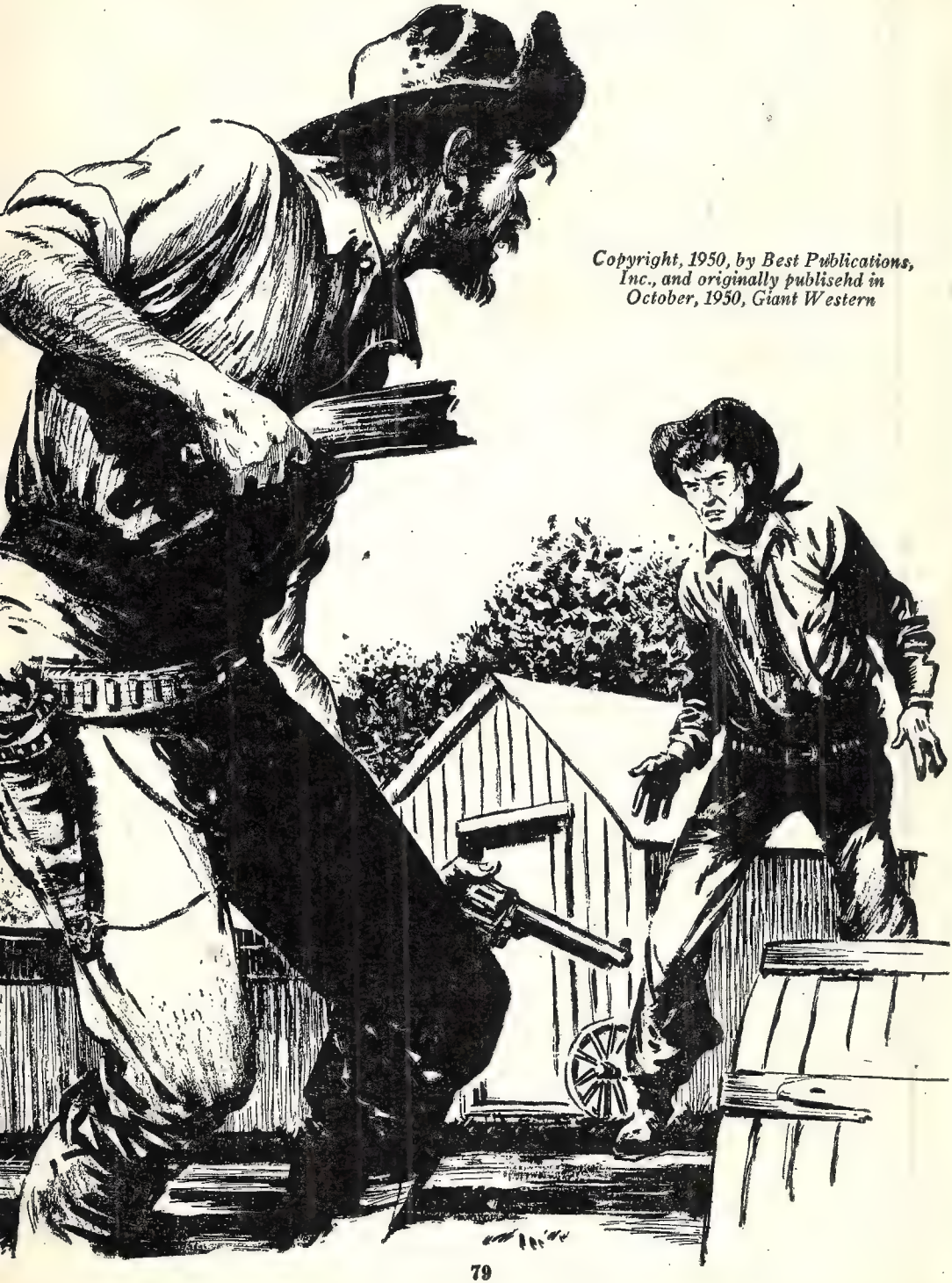
A Novel by WALT COBURN

I

THE Arizona cow country was slowly dying of thirst. Old-timers claimed it was the longest drouth in history, and nobody denied it. The green grass shriveled, dried up and died, and the sun baked the earth to a thick crust. Cattle, traveling a long way to the water-holes that became fewer and farther between, wore the trail deep. Their cloven hooves shuffled up dust and the continuous wind blew across the desert wasteland to gather in a haze at the foot of the mountains.

The sun was a brassy ball in a faded blue cloudless

Dave Ryan had but one slim chance left to save his ranch and he took it, even knowing it would probably cost him his life



Copyright, 1950, by Best Publications, Inc., and originally publisehd in October, 1950, Giant Western

sky. Bleached bones of cattle and wild burros and stray horses marked the dried-up waterholes.

Small rivers and creeks dried up and became sand washes. Thinking the water had gone underground, men dug deep holes in the dry beds and when they found no water, left their shovels sticking in the sand, grim monuments of defeat. Springs that had never before gone dry became dust bowls.

Dave Ryan, cowman, dug for water at Big Springs. Sweat soaked his faded blue cotton shirt, and when he leaned on his shovel to rest, the wind dried the sweat and left a white salt crust. His weathered face was dust-powdered, streaked with sweat that had carried the dirt into the week's stubble of wiry black whiskers that marred the clean line of his jaw. New lines that were etched around the corners of his gray-blue eyes and his mouth, made him look ten years older than his thirty years. His eyes were bloodshot and red-lidded and his lips were sun-cracked.

Three cows that had lost their calves because they were starving and had no milk in their udders, stood in the heavy sand, watching Dave Ryan dig. They were wild long-horned mountain cattle that had never let a horse rider get within range. But they stood close now, their hides stretched over their bones and the Long S brand standing out, as if they had declared a sort of truce because they sensed that the man with the shovel was digging for water.

ONLY when Dave was winded did he straighten up, leaning a little backward to get the kink out of his spine. His grimed hands were cramped around the shovel handle. He tilted his hat back and sweat ran from his untrimmed shock of wiry black matted hair. Pity for the cattle that were dying of thirst, filled him. Then his nerves, taut as fiddle strings, snapped. Leaning on his shovel, he cursed in a croaking, dry-throated whisper, opening the deep cracks in his blackened lips until the blood came. Their eyes staring at the man who cursed them, the dying cattle never moved from their tracks.

When the sound of his own voice came back to him, like some puny ineffectual noise beating against his eardrums, Ryan clamped his teeth down and bit his almost hysterical tirade off in the middle of a word. His cramped fingers loosened their grip on the shovel handle and he crawled out of the shallow hole he had dug. He walked over to where his thorn-scarred leather chaps lay on the ground and took a .45 six-shooter from one chaps pocket. When he straightened up with his gun in his hand, he looked at the three dry cows pityingly. He had the gun tilted back in his hand, his thumb on the hammer.

At the edge of the hole and just beyond the cows stood a big, gaunt, dun-colored renegade stag with a six-foot horn spread, the tip of one horn sawed off by the only cowhand who had ever roped him. The stag had been a maverick bull until he had been about a four year old. His dun hide wore a big Long S brand that had been put on with a running iron by Uncle Billy Scarborough, who had owned the Long S cow outfit until Dave Ryan, who had drifted down into Arizona from Wyoming, had picked up the bank mortgage and moved in. Uncle Billy said he went with the outfit, for boot, if Dave could put up with an old cut back, and Dave claimed him along with the outfit. It was Uncle Billy who had named the renegade stag Big Yaller.

Uncle Billy had pointed out the big stag one morning right after Dave Ryan had bought the outfit, where the stag had been bushed up on the far slope of the canyon.

"Big Yaller is a kind of landmark, Dave." Uncle Billy had said. "Like me. We're two of a kind that's outgrowed our usefulness. But me'n Big Yaller will hang and rattle for awhile."

"Whenever you sight that danged Big Yaller, match the old ox a race, for the fun of it. That's what he's a-hankering for. He sure admires to kick gravel in a cow pony's face when he fades on down the steep slant. Now that he's been stagged, that's all he's got to live for. Don't never disappoint that danged old left-over."

Dave Ryan was remembering Uncle Billy's words now, and lowered his gun. In all his three years, working as a wild brush popper

cowhand, and he'd matched the stag a few paces during that time, this was as close to catching Big Yaller as he'd ever got.

A hard lump formed in the young cowman's throat. Those three dry cows and Big Yaller were about all there was remaining of a sizable bunch of cattle in the Long S iron. Dave stood there, legs spread, for quite awhile, then blinked the sweat from his eyes and lifted the gun. He shot the three cows, each bullet going in behind an ear. The rough hills threw back the hollow echoes, and before the last one died away, Big Yaller had vanished from sight.

A faint grin of relief spread Dave Ryan's mouth. His lips cracked open again and there was the taste of blood in his mouth.

He put the gun back in the pocket of his chaps and buckled them on. He tightened his saddle cinch, mounted, and headed back for the home ranch, leaving his shovel stuck in the dry sand that had once been Big Springs.

THE sun was going down, a molten brass ball dropping below the ragged skyline when he rode down off the hogback ridge toward the adobe buildings and mesquite corrals below. The dry wash had been a flowing creek three years before when Dave had first sighted it.

The slopes and the valley below had been carpeted green, and where the foothills flattened out into the desert, the flat country had been green where the catclaw and mesquite were in leaf and the cacti were blooming with vivid red and orange and purple and lemon-yellow blossoms. It had been what Uncle Billy had called a "filaree spring." The weed called filaree was the finest cattle feed in the world. It grew in creeping trailers with small green leaves and tiny pinkish blooms.

Now the whole country was bare and parched, and had a dried-up-forever look. Far out across the desert a dust devil spiraled high, and far up into the pale sky, for all the world like a ghostly wraith leaving the drouthed-out earth and carrying the spirit of a dead cow country upward and far beyond into the relentless heavens.

The dismal creak of the old windmill greeted Dave Ryan as he rode up to the ranch house. Uncle Billy was squatted on his boot heels, his back against the adobe cabin. Short, sort of weathered and shriveled up, he had his battered old hat slanted across his puckered sky-blue eyes. His jaw had been shaved clean and a white mustache drooped down across the corners of his mouth. His shirt was patched at both elbows and his rusty old boots had been half-soled twice. His squinted eyes were watching the creaking windmill.

"She's sure scraping bottom, Dave." He spoke in a lazy soft-toned voice.

"Yeah."

Dave swung down, unsaddled, and turned his horse loose. He shoved out three empty shells from his gun, the brass cartridges making a faint tinkling sound as they struck the ground. He took three cartridges from the pocket of his old levis and reloaded the gun, and shoved it into the waistband of his overalls.

"We're plumb out of the cow business, Uncle Billy." A crooked grin twisted Dave's mouth.

"Then we don't have to worry no more. Just sit back and whittle on a stick."

Uncle Billy had been whittling. The pile of long shavings around his feet showed how long he'd been sitting there on his hunkers. He tossed what was left of the stick aside and closed the big blade on his jack-knife, brushing the whittlings off him as he got to his bowed legs. Dave's hands and face were dirty and his whole hide was dusty and sweaty, but he couldn't waste precious water taking a bath.

Uncle Billy had their supper of frijole beans and jerky ready. They carried their tin plates and tin cups of black coffee outside and sat down cross-legged and ate in silence. Plates emptied, cups drained, they were laid aside. Uncle Billy handed his sack of tobacco and book of wheat straw papers to Dave. They rolled their cigarettes thin and smoked slowly.

They had been running low on tobacco. But neither man made mention of it. There were a lot of things they took for granted, and they shared a sort of brooding silence. They sat there for a long time, until the long twilight thickened and the shadows of night

crept into the mountains.

A dry twig snapped in the near-by brush and both men looked up in that direction. They watched Big Yaller as he horned his way out of the heavy brush and headed for the horse trough, cloven hooves shuffling. He stopped at the trough, lifted his head, and looked toward the two men sitting there, without moving a muscle. Then Big Yaller shoved his head into the water and drank.

UNCLE BILLY SCARBOROUGH said softly, "First time I ever caught you in a lie, Dave. While that Big Yaller outlaw wears the Long S iron, we're still in the cow business." Uncle Billy's faded blue eyes lighted up strangely in the dusk.

When Big Yaller had drunk his fill, he headed for the little bunch of saddle horses and pack-mules, grazing among them on what hay they left on the ground.

"Big Yaller's range is at the upper end of Rough Canyon," Uncle Billy said. "I never figured he'd ever stray this far from his stomping ground and throw in with a bunch of cow horses that he figures is his mortal enemies. To say nothing of us pair of humans."

Uncle Billy tilted his head toward the sky. "New moon up yonder, Dave. When you can't hang your powderhorn on a new moon that's tilted like that, without wetting your powder, that's a wet moon. Looks like now's the time to make a wish."

II

THE moon was still in its first quarter when the rains came. The thunderheads had been building up to the south in Old Mexico. Sheet lightning flashed across the sky, and after that came the low growl of distant thunder.

Uncle Billy and Dave Ryan spread their tarp-covered roundup beds on the ground and lay awake watching the storm come up. The weather gave them something to talk about, and they swapped tall tales about flash floods and Wyoming blizzards.

It must have been somewhere around midnight when the first raindrops spattered on the canvas bed tarps, and when the two men looked up into the black starless sky they knew that this was it. The beginning of the rains that would put an end to the long drouth.

They got out of their soogans, stripped, and both stood there in the night, jay-bird naked, while the thunder rolled up out of Old Mexico and the lightning cracked, and the pitch-black darkness was lit up with a blinding glare. They let the heavy rain wash the stale grime of dust and sweat from their hides, and grinned at each other like two kids. In the little remuda beyond the barn, horses and mules rolled in the mud. When the drenching rain washed the mud off their backs they acted like spring colts.

"Lookit, Dave! There's that Big Yaller ox standing in the rain, for all the world like a backslid Christian getting his sins washed away!"

Big Yaller's wide black horns glistened in the lightning glare, and he lent his raucous bawl to the nickering and braying of the horses and mules.

"Like they was giving thanks," said Dave Ryan.

The rain fell in heavy sheets that left puddles of water all around. It came down faster than the sandy soil could drink it in.

Once the drouth was broken, it rained steadily for days, the kind of rain that was good for the country, giving the dry ground a chance to soak it in deep where it did some good.

The dry springs came back to life. The dry wash was once more a creek. Dave and Uncle Billy, at the start, had dragged out tubs and buckets, dishpans, and the big blackened coffee pot and set them out to fill. They pulled the canvas tarps off their beds and spread blankets and soogans out to get drenched.

"Looks like the whole dang outfit is getting the stink off." Uncle Billy grinned.

Dave went around barefooted, wearing only a wornout pair of levis, the legs rolled up almost to the knees. Nobody bothered to mend the leak in the cabin roof. And the green grass could almost be seen to grow. Dave went down in the well to measure the water, and rode out to measure the springs and water-holes.

It took a few weeks for the range to green out. Meanwhile, both men tried to keep busy. The rains had broken the long drouth. They had come too late to do Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy and the Long S outfit any good, but that didn't keep them from feeling happy about the cow country.

One morning Big Yaller was gone. By that time the cow horses and pack-mules had got used to the big stag grazing among them. Big Yaller was the only cow brute left in the Long S iron.

The morning Big Yaller turned up missing, Dave Ryan waited for Uncle Billy to give him the opening he needed, to put into words what he had been milling over in his mind while he watched the grass grow.

THEY were squatted on their hunkers at the big corral, whittling. Dave found a half-smoked sack of tobacco and the give-away papers that came with it in his pocket and rolled a cigarette. He handed the makings to Uncle Billy, and they lit their smokes off the same match.

Dave was thinking back to the first morning he had spent at the Long S Ranch and had tackled Uncle Billy for a job. Uncle Billy had told him that the bank had a mortgage on the outfit and was closing him out in a week or so. He'd lost the outfit in a poker game to John Deal who owned the Border Bank. Uncle Billy had got drunk on the Mexican side of the town of Los Gatos, and had pokered away his outfit at the International Club, also owned by John Deal, just across the line. John Deal, banker on the U. S. side of the line and square-deal gambler on the Mexican side of the Border, were one and the same man.

Dave had then told Uncle Billy how come he had drifted this far south from his home range in Wyoming. Dave Ryan had been one of the nester ranchers in the broad middle of the cattle war that was then going on. The big outfits called all the nesters cattle rustlers, and had put a bounty on their hides. Dave's father and two brothers had been killed by imported hired gunslingers. Dave had been lucky, having only a couple of bullet rips that were healing when the night riders had ridden up to the home ranch where he was alone. They had been wearing long saddle slickers covering their clothes and had handkerchiefs tied across their faces.

They threw a ketch rope over the ridge log outside the cabin, and held kangaroo court on Dave. They had all been in favor of him stretching rope, except for one man. He was the only man who had been wearing a yellow saddle slicker, and when it had come his turn to say how he was voting, he had lifted the black silk handkerchief tied across his face, and swallowed a drink from the bottle of rotgut he had in his hand. Dave had seen a week's crop of red whiskers when he tilted the bottle, and had seen that the man's eyes, were as green as a beer bottle.

When he had drained what was left in the bottle, he banged it against the cook stove. That had left him with the bottle neck in his left hand, and the broken edges made a wicked weapon. He had a white-bone-handled sixshooter in the other hand. He had told them to give Dave Ryan a saddle horse and a horse to pack his bed and let him quit the country. The gent in the yellow slicker had said he was sick of so much murdering. It was to be like he said or there'd be one hell of a ruckus, and his green eyes kept watching a big six-footer who had been doing most of the talking. He had made his whizzer stick and Dave had drifted south, headed for Mexico.

Dave Ryan had had enough money in a checking account in a Wyoming bank to buy himself a small outfit, providing he had the nerve to stop running too far south and to use the money. So when he had stopped at the Long S Ranch and Uncle Billy had told him about the mortgage, Dave had made his decision. He had quit running. He had ridden to town and filled out a counter check with the name of the Wyoming bank filled in with his own handwriting. It had drained his bank account, but it had been enough for him to pick up the Long S mortgage.

Dave had handed the check to John Deal and Deal had told him that Uncle Billy went with the outfit. John Deal and Dave Ryan had shaken hands on the deal. Both men knew that Dave Ryan, by signing a check on a Wyoming bank, had turned over his hole card for the banker to look at.

NOW as they sat smoking and whittling, Dave waited for Uncle Billy to break the silence. Finally Uncle Billy said:

"I know what's on your mind, Dave. You want to tackle John Deal for a loan of enough money to buy some Mexican cattle to restock the Long S range. I'm not lifting a hand to stop you. I won't try to talk you out of what you're aiming to do, but don't deal me in on it. From here on, it's your outfit. Do as you dang please with it."

Uncle Billy brushed off the whittlings and the blade of his stock-knife closed with a loud metallic snap. He got to his feet and walked off on bowed legs.

It was the first time since Dave had come here that he and the grizzled cowman had ever quarreled. Dave had expected him to blow up, which was why he'd kept putting it off. He expected Uncle Billy to bust out cussing, like he'd heard him do when he'd matched a race with a big maverick or when his ketch rope snapped, but he hadn't calculated on hurting the prideful old cowman. Now he saw Uncle Billy throw his saddle on the old flea-bitten gray he called Uncle Dudley and watched him ride off along the trail that twisted through the brush until he was out of sight. . . .

Dave figured he should look clean and halfway respectable if he hoped to get a bank loan, so he stripped and took a warm bath, shaved and put on clean clothes. He saddled the best horse in his Long S string and headed for the Border cowtown of Los Gatos.

He was headed across the mouth of Rough Canyon where it flattened out into a dry wash when he heard the brush crack up on the mountain side. He could hear Uncle Billy's high-pitched cowpuncher yelp echo between the rocky walls of Rough Canyon.

Dave reined in his horse behind some brush and watched.

III

BIG YALLER came down the steep slant with headlong speed. Uncle Billy, on Old Dudley, was a hundred yards behind, and wide open. His loop was cocked back across one faded denim shoulder and his old hat was yanked down at a slant across his squinted eyes. And until they hit the floor of the canyon it was a wild brushpopper race. Then the dun-colored stag, the horse and rider were out of sight in the heavy brush and big boulders.

Dave waited for quite awhile. Then halfway back up the side of the canyon he saw Big Yaller climbing slowly along the slanted trail that rimmed out in a low brushy saddle. Uncle Billy must have seen Dave at about that same time. He yelled a wild, reckless challenge to Big Yaller for a re-match, and Dave could hear Uncle Billy's high-pitched cursing.

Where the trail rimmed out the big dun stag had halted on the high rimrock, standing as motionless as a long-horned statue carved from yellow rock. He stood there until he got his wind, then tossed his wide horns and hooked his way through the thick brush. He was headed for Saddle Spring to water. He'd graze for awhile, then crawl into the thick manzanita and lie down, bushed up. A man on horseback could ride by within a stone's throw and the wily renegade stag would never move, and the cowhand would ride on without sighting him.

Uncle Billy got off and loosened his front cinch. He squatted and rolled a cigarette. After awhile he would ride back to the ranch, unsaddle, and make a pot of coffee and warm up the jerky and frijole beans. Content with knowing that there was one more wild race left in him and his old cowhorse.

Dave Ryan came close to turning back. He could take Uncle Billy and they could round up half a dozen more drouthed-out cowmen and take a pack outfit across the line into Mexico— make a *pasear*.

The last revolution across the Mexican border had killed some Mexicans who had owned vast Spanish grants. Thousands of cattle roamed there, their ownership disputed by Mexican ranchers who had escaped with their lives and were living on this side of the Border, self-exiled. If they went back to round up the cattle they claimed, they could be shot from their saddles or captured and 'dobe walled. One big Mexican rancher, thus exiled, had offered ten dollars per head for all cattle brought out of Mexico, and he

would pay the head tax.

Other exiled ranchers would wait for a cattle drive this side of the Border and claim what cattle were theirs, sell the cattle cheap to any man who had the nerve to make his Mexican roundup and get across the line. There were many hundreds of two-, three- and four-year-old mavericks with no brand on their hides. Those belonged to the man who got there first with a ketch rope and running iron.

All a cowman had to pay was the head tax. Or if he could slip 'em across the Border when the moon was right, without getting picked up by the Border Patrol, the cattle belonged to him when he got them dumped on his home range. They were called "wet cattle." Border jumper cowhands called such expeditions *pasears*. Just a pleasure trip into Mexico, was the translation. The free translation was something else again. It was called cattle rustling. But every cowman who called it that had his tongue in his cheek. Big outfits, reputed to be respectable, were buying "wet cattle," delivered on their range and paid for in cash on the barrel head.

NOT even the men who rode the Border Patrol could look down their law noses at the men who had the nerve and cunning and cowpuncher savvy to make a *pasear* into Mexico and get the cattle across the line without paying head tax. Whether or not they were willing to admit it, the hats of the officials were off to those Border-jumper cowhands.

Every cowhand along the Border talked about making one of those *pasears* into Old Mexico, but few dared tackle it. If they were caught down below, they didn't have a leg to stand on. They were cattle thieves, and the penalty was to be stood against an adobe wall and shot. A lot of wild, reckless cowhands who went down below the Border never came back. They vanished, and no more was ever heard of them.

Now and then a horse showed up, sore-backed, spur marked, barefooted, leg weary and gaunt-flanked from hard riding. But the man who had owned and ridden the horse never came back to die on his own soil.

Uncle Billy and Dave Ryan had talked some about making one of those *pasears* when they had sat around watching the green grass grow, and realized that there was only a lone wild stag in the Long S iron to graze it off.

"Looks like the only thing left for us to do, Dave, is to make a li'l old cattle gatherment below the line," Uncle Billy would say.

"Whenever you're ready, Uncle Billy," Dave would as quickly agree.

"Directly these ponies of ours put on a little more taller." The old cowman kept putting it off. "A man's got to have a stout horse between his legs. I been down there before."

But Uncle Billy was getting a little too old to endure the hardships, and Dave's was a half-hearted agreement. They kept waiting for a lucky windfall. Just what the lucky break would be, neither of them knew or would guess. It was like waiting for some rich uncle to die and leave the Long S outfit a million dollars, and there was no such rich uncle.

Dave Ryan was torn with indecision. There was something about that wild race down the slope that was almighty splendid. Heroic. It stood for something high and mighty and out of the younger cowman's reach, and Dave knew it. He wanted to catch up with Uncle Billy and ride home and tell him it was about time they quit talking about that *pasear* and hit the trail south in the morning.

"That danged ornery old warthog!"

Dave thought, and grinned mirthlessly, half amused, half annoyed. He was willing to bet that Uncle Billy had staged that wild race with a deliberate purpose in mind. He had known where to locate Big Yaller up high in Rough Canyon. He'd slipped around through the brushy saddle and when he'd sighted the big dun stag bushed up, he'd waited until he'd seen Dave headed along the trail to town. Then he'd put on a show for Dave's special benefit by matching that wild hell-bent race, knowing full well that Dave would get its meaning. A white-haired old brushpopper cowhand, forking a pensioned-off, stove-up, flea-bitten cowhorse, picking up the challenge of an ancient renegade longhorned stag, the last of the Long S

herd. The sole spectator, a man who'd grabbed a tail-hold on the Long S by picking up a mortgage on the outfit when cattle had been fat and it had been a filaree year—a man who'd been run out of Wyoming. Then, when the outfit had been drouthed-out, this same Dave Ryan had reached for a crying towel. He'd turned jelly bean and headed for town to borrow money from a man whose insides Uncle Billy hated, the man who had pokered him out of the Long S.

His own words came back to mock Dave now. "We're out of the cow business, Uncle Billy."

And later on that evening when the grizzled cowman had pointed to the dun stag watering after dark, and had said, "First time I ever caught you in a lie, Dave."

ACCORDING to the lights of that old-timer, young Dave Ryan lacked what it took to be a cattleman and play his string out. Moreover, Uncle Billy Scarborough, who was as tough as an old boot, had put on a show to prove it.

The cold, empty, sick feeling came back into Dave Ryan's stomach. It was the same feeling that had been inside him when the gunslingers had run him out of Wyoming, when those masked men in long saddle slickers had cussed him out with all the fighting names on earth and made him swallow it. He'd even now wake up in the middle of the night bathed in a clammy sweat, and with his sixshooter gripped in his hand, cursing himself for being the yellow-backed coward and quitter those men had called him.

Dave Ryan wore that coward brand deep inside, where it had never healed. He felt it now, like lead weighing his heart. It tied his stomach in a knot.

He poured the last of his tobacco into the last brown cigarette paper he had. When the paper broke in his unsteady hands he looked down at the flaky tobacco that sprinkled his shirt. His grin was a bitter, twisted line.

"You yellow-backed quitter," he told himself. "You haven't got the nerve to look that old-timer in the eye."

Dave Ryan mentally quirted himself all the way to town. He called himself all the ugly names he could think up. He recalled things he'd told Uncle Billy when he bought the place, when he'd set fire to the mortgage and lit his cigarette with its flame, for all the world like some get-rich-quick millionaire he'd read about lighting a big cigar with a hundred-dollar bill.

"I got a bellyful of running away, looking back like some coyote along my trail," he'd declared. "This is as far as they can run me. If they cold trail me here, I'll make a stand, regardless."

Dave Ryan sure talked a game fight when he ran off at the head to Uncle Billy. But he'd turned out to be no more than a loud-mouthed jelly bean.

Be sure to wipe both feet on the welcome mat before you go inside the bank. Tip your hat. Beg your pardon, Mr. Deal. I came here to beg a loan. I'm passing the hat like a beggar. How's that again, please, Mr. John Deal? Oh, Uncle Billy Scarborough? He's in good health. But he's too almighty prideful to come begging a dollar from the man who pokered him out of his Long S outfit!

"But not me. No *pasear* into Old Mexico for this hombre. It's easier to come a-begging."

Dave Ryan was still in that frame of mind when he rode into the Border cowtown of Los Gatos in the middle of the afternoon. A cowboy, even if he is a low-down coward, takes care of his horse first. Dave headed for the barn and feed corral at the edge of town.

IV

DAVE paid little attention to the man sitting astraddle of the high mesquite corral, who wore a pair of dirty levis shoved into the tops of rusty boots. He had a pair of large-roweled silver-mounted Mexican spurs strapped on. A shapeless old hat slanted on dank rust-colored, uncut hair and wiry rust-colored whiskers covered his lean jaws. His large nose was sunburnt and peeled and his blood-shot green eyes were squinted as they looked Dave Ryan and his Long S horse over. An old cartridge belt studded with .45 cartridges sagged about his lean flanks, and a white bone-handled six-shoot-

or was in an open holster that was tied down on his saddle-muscled thigh. He had a half-emptied quart of colorless tequila in his hand, the cork gripped between large strong yellowed teeth, and and he was a little drunk.

He grinned and spat out the cork, aiming it at Dave's hat, but it went past Dave's nose. Dave looked up at the man, then saw the bone-handled gun and stiffened in his saddle. His right hand dropped to the gun in his own chaps pocket.

"Have a drink." A long arm thrust the bottle at him.

Dave didn't want a drink, but he took the bottle. The glass felt warm. He held it in his left hand and his eyes watched the man on the corral fence warily as he tilted the bottle. The raw, potent peppery-tasting tequila was almost hot in his mouth. He swallowed quickly and a cough rose in his throat.

"Take another 'un to settle the smoke." The big man was grinning.

Dave took another big swallow of the stuff and handed back the bottle.

"How's that danged cranky old Long S warthog?" the man asked, as he gripped the neck of the bottle and kept swallowing.

Dave watched the prominent Adam's apple bobbing up and down like a cork in the corded sunburnt neck. "Uncle Billy's doing all right," he commented.

"You must be the feller Square Deal sent out to take Uncle Billy's outfit over?" the man said, but he didn't give Dave a chance to answer. He went on:

"I hear you got dried out. Along with all the other hard-luck outfits hereabouts. There's two-three horses here in the feed yard belonging to a few of 'em. They came to town to beg Square Deal for a loan but they'd been more likely to squeeze blood from a granite boulder. Them sorry dried-out cowmen is down across the line right now drowning their sorrows in rotgut." His eyes were wary, cunning, as he asked a final question, "Uncle Billy send you in to beg a loan?"

Dave felt his face get hot. The warm tequila was churning inside his empty stomach and he was getting a little drunk. Again he didn't have a chance to answer.

"Not him!" The lanky red-whiskered man chuckled. "Not that prideful old devil. I worked for him when I was a kid. He gimme my first job punching cows. He learnt me plenty. He took me along into Mexico. We got drunk with the Federalistas. Then a week later we got drunk with the Villistas. Uncle Billy and Pancho Villa drunk outa the same wine sack while his men rounded up more cattle than we could drive. So Villa sent his men along and we shoved better'n a thousand head acrost to the tune of *La Cucaracha.* Some of Villa's men went ahead to cut the fence. Uncle Billy Scarborough is *muy hombre.* I don't know what they'd call him up in Wyoming."

He ignored Dave's right hand that gripped the butt of his gun, and waved him on with the almost empty bottle.

He told Dave, "Put up that Long S horse, then dust yourself off and go in by the side door of Square Deal's bank. I'll be a-setting right here on this mesquite pen when you get back. You can tell Square Deal that the booze you just drank came from Booger Red's bottle.

"I got a thousand head of Mexican dogies a-waiting for me just below the Border. I pokered the whole away to one of Square Deal's tinhorns last night at his International Club. But they cold-decked me, and I'll see Square Deal in hell before I deliver 'em. That's what I just finished telling Square Deal in his bank. I walked out the front door and the doorman locked it after me."

He drained the bottle, then crashed it on the mesquite corral. He saluted Dave Ryan with the jagged weapon, his green eyes glittering. This Booger Red was ugly drunk and hunting for bad trouble.

There was no mistaking the man now. Dave knew him to be the man in the yellow slicker, with another smashed bottle neck in his hand. Then below the wicked eyes had been tied a black silk neck handkerchief. To this man Daye Ryan owed his life. And it was going to be a dangerous debt to pay off. Perhaps he would go even deeper in debt to the renegade Border-jumper called Booger Red—for a thousand head of cattle.

Now was as good a time as any. It might

have been the tequila working. Dave looked up at Red with a flat grin. When he opened his mouth to speak, the big man straddling the corral fence shook his head.

"Save it till you get back. It don't take no mind reader to know what you want to lay on the line for a proposition. I'll be riding this fence and working on a fresh bottle when you get back. Maybe me'n you will be camped down yonder singing to 'em about second guard time. *Quien sabe? Vamanos,* Ryan!"

Booger Red made it sound like a threat. His bloodshot eyes were wicked and angry and there was a contemptuous twist to his leering grin. He paid no attention whatever to the gun gripped in Dave Ryan's sweaty hand. He was dismissing him just as he would send some dirty-nosed kid on a senseless errand, like asking a man for the loan of a left-handed ketch rope.

And Dave Ryan had to take it.

He was half blinded by futile seething anger when he found the side door of the bank unlocked, opened it, and walked inside. Coming from the bright sun glare into the dark shadow of the short hall he blinked his eyes and collided headlong with a man and a woman who were just leaving the bank.

"Watch where you're going, stumblebum."

The man was big. He reached out and grabbed the front of Dave's shirt. The shirt, rotted by too many washings, ripped from neckband to shirt tail, jerking Dave off-balance.

Dave wasn't paying the big man any attention. He was staring at the girl, yanking off his hat, flushed and awkward with embarrassment. The girl had stumbled a little and Dave reached out quickly to grab her arm to keep her from falling.

"I'm sorry, ma'am—"

Something hit him hard alongside the jaw and cut off his apology. Dave reeled backward. He saw the dull glint of the blued steel gun-barrel as it chopped down across his head. Everything was a red-black pinwheel inside his head. His knees buckled and he went down like a beef knocked in the head by an ax.

Dave Ryan came alive inside John Deal's office. Somebody had dropped his limp carcass into a big leather-cushioned armchair and left him there. His eyes blinked open against a dull throbbing pain. He saw John Deal sitting in a swivel chair behind a highly polished flat-topped Mexican mahogany desk.

JOHN SQUARE DEAL, high stakes gambling man south of the line, respectable banker north of the Border, was a handsome man with carefully trimmed iron-gray hair and clipped mustache. He was well-barbered, well-tailored in a salt and pepper worsted double-breasted suit, spotless white shirt and a dark wine-colored silk tie in which was stuck a diamond horseshoe tie pin. A diamond ring was on his well-kept hands. His olive skin was stretched tightly across his cheek-bones and along his lean jaw. He had an aquiline nose, a thin-lipped mouth, and his eyes were as gray and hard as polished steel.

"There are times," Deal was saying in a toneless voice, "when Jack Law is apt to carry his ramrod job too far."

Dave sat up slowly. One side of his jaw was rapidly swelling. His hand went up to feel the knot on his head. It felt sticky, and when he looked at his hand there was blood on it. His hat was lying on the Mexican tiled floor at his feet. It had a crushed-in look as if somebody had deliberately stepped on it.

Pain stabbed through Dave's head as he bent over, picked up his hat, and shaped it as best he could. When he looked around the room he saw that the door was closed and that he and the banker were alone. He looked across the desk at the banker. The silence was beginning to grow uneasy when Deal's toneless voice broke it.

"You're the last of the drouthed-out cowmen to show up, wanting a loan. I had to turn them all down. I run my Border Bank strictly within the rules and regulations of the banking laws. Eventually the bank will own those ranches.

"*I'm* a gambler by profession. But I don't gamble with the bank money that's entrusted to me. Do I make myself plain, Ryan?"

"Plenty." Dave pulled his hat down

across his aching head and started to get to his feet.

"Sit down, Ryan." Deal's toneless voice made it something of a command.

Dave got to his feet. He was taking no orders from the banker. He had taken his six-shooter from the pocket of his chaps and shoved it down inside the waistband of his levis. His hand reached back instinctively to make sure that the gun was still there, hung by the hinged clip that covered the cylinder.

Deal's eyes narrowed and his right hand rested on the desk within quick reach of the gun he carried underneath his coat in an armpit holster. Poker-faced, he watched Dave's hand straighten the gun and come away.

"Would a thousand head of Mexican cattle restock your drouthed-out Long S range, Ryan?"

"Yes." Dave spoke slowly, his eyes watching the gambler. He figured he knew what was coming.

"I own this bank and the International Club across the line," Deal went on. "You've no doubt been there. But I don't think you've ever been in one back room marked 'PRIVATE,' where the poker chips are all one yellow color etched in black with a longhorned steer head, each chip representing a cow brute. The room is reserved for cattle. It was there that Uncle Billy Scarborough gambled his Long S outfit away to me. He signed the mortgage on his outfit on a poker table.

"I keep the International Club money here in my bank in a separate account." Deal smiled thinly, and a tiny spark of sardonic humor gave light to his cold eyes. "The banker's right hand," he explained. "don't know what the gambler's left hand is doing. Not that I am ashamed of my gambler's profession, because my games are all on the square, and I pride myself on that moniker 'Square Deal.'

"A banker is supposed to be respectable and above reproach. I built a three-story solid brick house on this side of the Border as a monument to that respectability because I have a wife who is as fine and decent and good as the finest lady in the land. And I have a grown daughter." His thin smile twisted faintly. "You just bumped into Ramona, as you came in."

"Yeah."

DAVE RYAN stood there with a mirthless grin on his face.

The banker reached into a cigar humidor and took out a long thin twisted cigar, bit off the end, and lit it.

"The International Club won a thousand head of cattle last night from a renegade Border-jumper called Booger Red O'Hara. Jack Law, the man who rapped you to sleep with a gun-barrel, was the dealer who pokered Booger Red out of the cattle drive he'd fetched up out of Chihuahua. This is no Border Bank deal, so there'll be no scratch of any pen on paper. I'll pay the head tax when the cattle cross the line. I'll get word to the Border Patrol to pass the herd. I'll pay the damages and put 'em in the Long S iron."

V

JOHN SQUARE DEAL filled two shot glasses from a bottle of bonded whisky he took from a desk drawer and got to his feet, shaking the legs of his creased pants down over the tops of polished black boots. He lifted his glass.

Dave Ryan had a twisted grin on his face as he reached for his own drink.

"Salud!" said the poker-faced Deal.

"Salud!" echoed Dave Ryan.

Their eyes met and held as they downed the aged smooth whisky.

"There's a catch to it." Deal's eyes were cold, merciless. "Booger Red welched on his bet."

"Your whisky—" Dave grinned slowly—"took the taste of Booger Red's luke-warm tequila out of my mouth."

"I'm not holding you to any sort of bargain we drank on." Deal's cold eyes were probing deep. "But I know more about you than you think, Ryan."

"I never tried to cover my back trail from Wyoming. I kept my own name."

"I take most men at their face value," said the banker. "But no man ever double-crossed Square Deal—twice."

Dave nodded briefly.

Deal told him, "You're on your own when you leave this bank, but before you go, I'll tip you off. Uncle Billy Scarborough you already know for a man you can tie to. Booger Red O'Hara is big and tough. If he likes you he'll go the limit, and he does his fighting in the open. He's a man who declares himself for the whole wide world to hear. You can use your own judgment about telling him the deal we made. Jack Law is as treacherous as he is dangerous. He's a top cowhand, a fast gunslinger, and a tinhorn gambler. He's got the job of running my cow outfit that brand's the Carpenter's Square.

"Up until recently Booger Red O'Hara and Jack Law were sort of side-partners. Renegades. Border-jumpers. Then somewhere, somehow, they had a falling out. That's where their trails forked.

"When Jack Law told me he'd pokered Booger Red out of a thousand head of cattle, I didn't like the look in his eyes. I told him flatly that those cattle would never go into the Square iron.

"My daughter Ramona was here. That girl should have been born a boy. She's better than most men around a ranch. That's why I gave her the outfit and registered the Square iron in her name. She's headstrong and wild as a young colt but she's all thoroughbred and clean as the wind. I've let her have her own way and lead her own life."

His hands clenched as if he were gripping something inside him.

"Up until now, Ryan, I've never had cause to regret giving her a free rein. But now, right now, I'm not so sure. That kid of mine is in danger. If I try to pull her up with a spade bit, she'll take the bit in her teeth and stampede and the high, tight barbed wire fence she'll run into will play the devil with the finest, cleanest youngster on earth."

Dave watched the man's hand slowly shove in under his coat and he knew that Deal's fingers had closed around the butt of a gun.

"Before that happens to that kid of mine—" Deal's eyes were bleak.

The notion struck Dave suddenly that John Square Deal was trying to bribe him and was using Booger Red's cattle with the disputed ownership for some sort of a bribe.

HE KNEW that Deal was going against his second nature when he confided in any man. He could have a shrewd, cold, calculating purpose behind it. It would be more typical of the gambling man who had turned respectable banker, and he was cunning enough to play it that way.

"Me'n Uncle Billy," Dave said quietly, "need cattle. We're broke. We'll pay for what cattle out of Booger Red's thousand head we put in the Long S iron as quick as we put taller on their ribs and sell 'em at a good price. And it might be Booger Red that gets the money, not Square Deal. It all depends on which way the wind blows. I reckon you understand. I'm taking my own risks when I throw in with Booger Red, and I'm playing my hand according."

Deal's hand came away from his gun. Dave thumbed back his hat and passed the palm of his hand across the knot on his head, and his hand came away blood-smeared.

"If it's Jack Law you're talking about," Dave said, as he wiped the blood off on his town shirt, "I'd be proud to tackle that job, free of charge."

"I wasn't trying to hire your gun, Ryan. You got me wrong." Deal smiled thinly. "I take care of my own family troubles. Do my own killing, if it comes down to cases. It's a matter of pride with me."

Deal walked over to a map similar to the ones used in schoolrooms. It rolled up like a window blind in a wooden case. He pulled the map down. It was a large, detailed map, made by a skilled draughtsman, showing that section of New Mexico and part of Old Mexico below the Border, with the large holding that Deal claimed marked off in red ink along the exact boundaries, and marked with his Square brand. Likewise the ranches of several drouthed-out cowmen, each outfit marked with the owner's brand, outlined in red and black borders.

"Everything inside the red line is land that I've deeded over to my daughter Ramona. What's inside the red and black

borders is what I hold mortgage paper on. My ownership is problematical."

Deal pointed with a long-bladed ivory paper knife to the land marked with the Long S brand, outlined in heavy black ink and with the name "Scarborough" written below the brand.

"I wrote that in long before Uncle Billy pokered the Long S away. His name is there to stay." Deal relit his twisted cigar and his eyes watched Dave through the smoke haze.

"The money you paid over when you lifted the mortgage was put on deposit in your name in the Border Bank. I can show it to you on the books."

"Well I'll be damned!" Dave spoke like a man who'd just had the wind punched out of him.

"Exactly. As long as Uncle Billy Scarborough is alive, he owns the Long S outfit." Deal let the map roll into the wooden case. "When Jack Law told me he was claiming those drouthed-out ranches and the Long S to boot, I let him talk. When he said he was using Booger Red's cattle to restock the range, I still checked the bet to him.

"But when he told me he was going to marry my daughter, I reached for my gun. I'd have killed him if he hadn't stepped in behind Ramona who happened to be in my office. When she spoke up and said she was going to marry Jack, I told her I would rather see her dead. I still had my gun in my hand when he backed out the door, taking her with him, hiding behind her when she closed the door. They were gone when I found you and brought you in here." Deal spat the half-smoked cigar into the brass cuspidor alongside the desk.

"I had Booger Red O'Hara in mind for a ramrod when I gave the Square outfit to my kid, but she picked Jack Law. O'Hara is so homely he scares timid folks. That's why they call him Booger.

BEFORE DAVE could comment, the banker went on, "Jack Law is big and handsome and has a way with women. They can't see the snake in his veins. As soon as he got a foothold, he fired the Mexican *vaqueros* I had hired, and hired renegades like himself. They'd been rounded up in Wyoming after you left, shipped out on a train and told never to come back. Jack Law knew where to locate 'em and they've been drifting into the Square headquarters ranch, like they were moving in to stay."

"I've heard about it," said Dave Ryan.

"You told Uncle Billy?"

"No. I didn't want to worry him."

"Somebody told him. He knows all about it. Could be he kept quiet for the same reason. He didn't want to worry you. The ornery old warthog thinks I'm the man who fetched them in. Uncle Billy can be mule-headed. But he should know Square Deal better than that."

"Uncle Billy—" Dave grinned—"might know he was wrong, but he won't admit it, even to himself." He tucked in his torn shirt. "Time I got going. I left Booger Red astraddle of the feed corral fence where he said he'd be, working on a fresh bottle, when I got back."

"I wouldn't keep him waiting too long." Deal opened the door of his office and walked down the narrow hallway to the side door and opened it. He said,

"We both know where we stand, now, Ryan. Both on dangerous ground." He held out his hand. "Jack Law is my wolf meat."

Dave told him, "I've run into your daughter Ramona a few times since I come to the country. Mostly it was out on the range. And I've danced with her at a few bailes. We got along fine. If Jack Law gets in my way, it's going to be me or him. And I hope it's me."

"So far as I'm concerned, it's an open field. I'd be proud to claim you as a son-in-law. Good luck, Dave. You'll need it."

VI

NO LONGER was Booger Red straddling the fence. He had thrown his other leg over and both bootheels were hooked there. He waved a half-emptied bottle at Dave. His slitted eyes looked at Dave's torn shirt and at the knot under his tilted hat brim, the hair crusted with drying blood. His wide mouth grinned derisively.

"Did Square Deal dirty his hands on you, Ryan?" He shoved the bottle at Dave. "Or did he get his hired man Jack Law to throw you back out in the street?"

"How much do you want for them sorry Mexican dogies of yours? Laid down on the Long S range?" Dave ignored the proffered bottle.

"When I turn 'em loose on the Long S range, mister," said Booger Red flatly, "I'll make my dicker with Uncle Billy Scarborough." He slid down and his big roweled Mexican spurs jangled mockingly when his feet struck the ground. The grin had died and his eyes looked wicked.

He tilted the bottle and let the warm tequila trickle into his mouth, and gargled noisily, with his mouth wide open. Then he lowered his head and spat the mouthful out on the ground at Dave's feet. Some of it splashed on his boots.

Dave clawed for his gun and the hammer was thumbed back when it pointed at the big man's stomach.

Booger Red's slivered green eyes looked down at the gun. The bottle he held in his hand made a swift slithering arc as it chopped down on the gun barrel and Dave's finger twitched on the trigger. The explosion of the .45 cartridge sounded loud. The slug ripped a furrow along the dusty ground between Booger Red's widespread boots. The gun was twisted out of Dave's hand. It was in the big man's fist now, and he held the jagged edge of the smashed bottle in his other hand. He had the six-shooter gripped by the barrel.

"Don't waste 'em thataway." He handed the gun back to Dave, butt first. "If you run up against Jack Law and them renegade cowhands he's got working for the Square, you might need all the gun lead you got."

Booger Red tossed the jagged bottle neck in a trash barrel, and his grin was wolfish.

"That cost me a little likker, but I reckon it was worth it. I found out you'd do to take along on a *pasear.*"

He went into the barn, his spurs clanging with each step. He came out leading two saddled horses. One of the horses had Dave's saddle on its back and a carbine was shoved into a scabbard that hung by a strap from the horn.

"Every man has his own way of packing a saddle gun. I left it for you to fix." Booger Red swung into his own saddle.

There was an overwhelming ruthlessness about this big red-muzzled, raw-boned man with the bottle-glass green eyes that made Dave Ryan feel as awkward as a greenhorn. For all of his bragging whisky talk he gave the impression of a man eager to back up his threats. Cunning, merciless, tough as rawhide, he had taunted Dave into making a gun play and showed him up for a rank pilgrim. But he had a method behind everything he said or did.

He left Dave all confused, mixed up in his mind about the sort of man he actually was. He hated and distrusted Booger Red, and at the same time he had a sneaking admiration for him.

If this was going to be a proving ground, then Dave would play his tough string out. He slid the gun scabbard so that it went underneath the right stirrup fender and under the knee joint where the bulge would fit into the bend of his knee. He looked at the brand on his horse, before he forked the saddle. The gelding, a solid mahogany bay, had the Square Deal's carpenter square on his left thigh, and the brand had been vented. The horse Booger Red rode wore a similar brand.

DAVE had just shoved his right foot in the stirrup when the sound of shooting blasted the stillness. It came from up the wide dusty street from the direction of the Border Bank. Half a dozen riders, their horses spurred to a run, were shooting up the town, their drunken shouts punctured by the roaring explosions of .45 cartridges. Riding stirrup to stirrup, kicking up a heavy dust cloud behind, their bullets kicked up the dust ahead.

Dogs barked, then ran for cover, their tails between their legs. Horses tied to the hitch-rack lunged back, breaking bridle reins and stampeding, stirrups flapping. A bunch of gaily feathered bantams scratching out in the street, cackled hysterically and scattered. One gamecock, his head shot off.

floundered in the dust, spouting blood.

The riders were headed at a high run down the street toward the livery and feed barn and the high mesquite corral.

"Get in here! Pronto!"

Booger Red jumped his horse into the barn and jerked his .30-30 saddle carbine from scabbard. Dave followed his lead. Booger Red's big tobacco-stained teeth were bared.

"Looks like Jack Law sent out his bill collectors," he snarled. "We got what it takes for final payment. Shoot for their stomachs and don't waste good cartridges. You could kill 'em all, and not get a good man out of the lot."

The men were charging down in a cloud of swirling dust just as a top surrey, drawn by a matched team of dark bays, rounded the corner of the two-storied brick building John Deal had erected to house his Border Bank.

Ramona Deal handled the lines of the high spirited bays like an expert, holding them down to a fast trot that made the wheels spin. A woman sat in the back seat, a black silk-fringed mantilla with large red roses heavily embroidered was held above her graying black hair by a tortoise shell Spanish comb. A light-weight tan lap robe lay across her lap to keep out the dust. John Square Deal's wife, and the mother of the girl who drove the team. A striking woman with Spanish blood in her veins. She had been a beautiful girl who had matured into a handsome woman.

The rig rounded the corner of the bank and was all but ridden down by the drunken renegade cowhands. The surrey had come to pick up the banker and take him home. Square Deal stepped out of the front door of his bank and was met with a volley of shots.

He staggered forward a couple of steps, slid his gun from the shoulder holster and commenced shooting, his legs spread to hold his balance. He went down, his gun spewing fire. One of the men went off his mount backward. Another rider dropped his gun and clawed for the saddlehorn. They never slacked rein as they rode past, shooting at the wounded man on the wide plank sidewalk. Glass shattered as some of the shots went wild, breaking the windows.

The surrey team reared, then lunged into their collars. Terrified by the yelling and shooting, they almost upset the rig. If the girl hadn't been an expert driver the surrey would have been wrecked. She swung the runaway team down the street that lengthened into the stage-coach road. It led past the barn where Booger Red and Dave Ryan sat their horses.

"Get across the street, on the far side, Ryan!" shouted Red. "I'll stay here. Don't move till the rig passes in betwixt us. Then open 'er wide. We'll lane that team and both grab a bridle at the same time. Don't reach out till I holler, or you'll turn the team and it'll be a wreck. Get!"

A FEW scattered shots whined too close as Dave jumped his horse out of the barn. Behind the runaway team he could see the riders fan out, scatter, and quit the main street, all but hidden in the swirling yellow dust of the runaway. Dave owed his life to that dust cloud. He slid his horse to a halt, waiting for the runaway surrey horses to come abreast of him. He saw Booger Red ride out and pull up, leaving the way clear.

Dave's blood pulsed in his throat as he watched the runaway team rapidly close the distance. He saw the girl's face, pale underneath her suntan. She was wearing an olive green dress and had lost her hat, and her heavy copper-tinted, black hair, had tumbled down. Her gloved hands sawed at the lines and she had one foot braced against the dashboard. Her mother, in the back seat, was clinging onto the side, her face chalk-white.

As the runaway team came between the two men, both spurred their horses. They came from behind and neither the mother nor the girl even noticed them until they rode past the surrey and were alongside the team, closing in, with the team and saddle horses racing neck and neck. Both riders nosed past the team.

"Now!" Booger Red's voice sounded flatly across the sound of pounding hooves and the rattle of wheels.

Dave's right hand reached out and caught

the buggy line just behind the bit. Booger Red did the same. They pulled steadily back and slowed the bay team down to a lope, then to a trot, and finally to a halt. By that time they were half a mile beyond town.

"I got 'em, boys!" Ramona Deal's voice was steady.

Dave and Booger Red let go. The bay team dripped sweat and were blowing hard. Ramona turned them around and headed back for town. Both men rode alongside the rig. Booger Red pulled off his hat. His homely face was sweat-beaded.

"God bless you," Mrs. Deal said to him, "and you too, young man. I'll say a prayer for you later."

A small crowd had gathered around the wounded man in the doorway of the bank building. When the surrey and the riders came up, the crowd opened and made a lane for the vehicle. Booger Red told a couple of the men to hold the team, and for them to drag the renegades' dead carcasses off the street out of sight.

Deal was sitting on the plank walk, his back propped against the brick wall. He looked at Dave and then at Booger Red. His eyes thanked them.

Both women were kneeling beside the wounded man. A doctor had his black bag opened.

"Not yet, Doc." Deal's voice sounded gritty. "Not till I get home. Booger Red and Dave will load me in the rig."

Deal's tailored suit and white shirt were blood-stained. He had been hit by half a dozen bullets, and was still numb from shock. The pain was yet to come in full force.

In his wife's brown eyes were dark shadows of dread and grief as she looked up. Deal forced a grin as he held her hand.

"Will somebody please bring the padre?" Mr. Deal asked in Spanish.

Some small Mexican boys who had been watching, wide-eyed, turned and ran, making it a race to get to the padre at the old Mission, their voices shrill as their bare feet kicked up the dust.

Deal gritted his teeth as the men laid him on the back seat of the surrey. "I'm not ready to die," he had told his wife. When he looked at her there was a softness in his eyes. This Square Deal, gambler, loved his wife. Perhaps it was for her he'd turned banker.

"I'm turning the deal over to you," he told Booger Red. "You know how to deal 'em. Take care you come back alive and fetch Dave back with you."

WHEN Dave helped Ramona up over the cramped front wheel onto the front seat her gloved hand tightened in his.

"When Jack Law's gunmen shot my father," she said, loud enough for all to hear, "he released me from my promise of marriage. I only said I would marry him because he threatened to kill my father unless I did marry him. That tinhorn sport broke his word.

"I'll expect you at the house when you come back, Dave, and I'll try then to thank you for what you did." She smiled, the deep promise in her eyes leaving Dave Ryan numbed and tongue-tied.

Booger Red was helping Deal's wife up onto the front seat.

"*Gracias,* Vincent." A motherly frown went with her gentle smile. "You forgot to come to see me this time. I hope you have quit drinking."

"Yes, ma'am."

The big tough cowhand stood like an awkward school kid, his hat in his hand.

"Them folks in Mexico sent their best regards," he said. "They built a little shrine for you in the hills, and candles always burn there. I promise to cut down on the drinking and gambling."

His eyes cut a desperate look at Ramona. She winked and tightened the lines, and the rig got under way.

Ramona's gloved hand went to her lips and she leaned out and her hand touched Dave's mouth.

"*Vamanos,*" Booger Red said harshly. "Let's git!"

"Some fellers get paid with a promise," growled the big red-headed Border-jumper as they headed for the gateway into Mexico. "All I got was a scolding." His sunbleached brows pulled together. "Only the señora calls me Vincent. From anybody else that's a fighting name."

Two men of the Border Patrol stood at the gateway in the high barbed wire fence that marked the international boundary. Both wore cowpuncher garb. Only the badges on their shirts told that they were law officers. They looked Dave Ryan over closely, and called Booger Red by name.

Booger Red took a leather-covered vest pocket tally book from his pocket. He carefully tore out a page that was covered with brands and figures, and handed it over to the man whose badge was lettered "Inspector."

"Still repping for the señora?"

"Until I die," said Booger Red. "Her prayers are keeping me alive. I'm crossing a thousand head, before morning. We might spill a few head along the road. The señora'll pay the head tax. You boys might as well go home and get a good night's sleep."

"Jack Law just crossed with his tough outfit," one of them reminded him.

"I'll be watching out for that *cabron*. This is Dave Ryan, Uncle Billy Scarborough's partner in the Long S."

"So we figured. Uncle Billy left a message for you." He looked at Dave. "He went across with half a dozen drouthed-out cowmen on a *pasear* an hour ago. Said for you to stick close to Booger Red, and he'd meet you down below the line." A grin spread across the inspector's leathery face.

"Uncle Billy said he'd run out of cattle and outa smoking tobacco at the same time. He came down here to lay in a fresh supply. Like old times, Booger Red. You teamed up again?"

Booger Red pulled the cork on a bottle and handed it to the inspector.

"You know damned well we don't never drink while we're on duty," said the disgusted lawman.

"I thought you was going home to bed." Booger Red grinned flatly.

THE inspector drank and handed the bottle to the younger Border Patrol man. Jerking his thumb in Booger Red's direction, he said:

"Square Deal turns over his Saturday night's take at the International Club to his señora to put in the collection basket at mass. The señora sometimes takes out a fifty-fifty cut and gives it to Booger Red. He goes down into Chihuahua with it and pays them *paisanos* cash for what cattle they round up and help him drive back. And this big red-muzzled jasper has the gall to sell them Mex dogies to Square Deal. And Deal makes his daughter Ramona a present of the cattle. It's a sure deep secret. None of 'em is supposed to know what the others are doing. They never let on to one another."

His low chuckle died out as his puckered eyes hardened.

"Then this no-good *cabron* Jack Law shows up. Booger Red and him was once pardners in Wyoming until they split the blankets and busted up. This might be the big showdown." He fingered the law badge pinned to his shirt. "I could shed this tin badge, Booger, if your outfit is short-handed."

"Nope. You got a missus and kids. I'll drop around one of these evenings for a bait of her dried apple pie. So long."

It was past sundown when Dave and Booger Red rode away. They had left the Border town behind when a group of riders rode up out of the dusk. Uncle Billy Scarborough rode in the lead.

VI

UNCLE BILLY grinned as he handed Dave a new sack of Bull Durham and a brand new book of wheat straw cigarette papers.

"Looks like you done snagged your best shirt, Dave."

"Last time I saw you," said Dave, "you'd lost another race with Big Yaller."

"The sucker bushed up on me'n my pony. These boys were waiting for me when I got home. When I stopped to pick you up I found out you'd already throwed in with this big sorrel-whiskered gent. So we came on ahead. Where's that herd of yours, Booger?"

"We'll ride up on the outfit directly," said Booger Red. "Square Deal's been shot by some of Jack Law's renegades. It's a long odds gamble."

Uncle Billy's face looked gray. He stared

off into the gathering darkness. "I hope he makes a live of it. I'd like to buy him a drink."

"It's about time, you mule-skulled wart-hog. The señora always asks about you. You're Ramona's godfather. What relation does that make Dave Ryan? Your godfather son-in-law?"

Uncle Billy crowded his horse close and peered into Dave's eyes. Dave felt his face redden.

"What you been up to, Dave?"

"Stopping runaways," said Booger Red.

He lifted his horse to a long lope and rode on ahead. The dim trail twisted through patches of mesquite where it sloped into a dry wash. The night's stillness was ripped by sudden gunfire. Booger Red had ridden into an ambush.

"Fan out!"

Uncle Billy's voice cracked like a bull-whip.

"Kill every last one of them bushwhacking hellions!"

Booger Red's riderless horse came back toward them at a run.

Uncle Billy shouted something at Dave, but he had his horse spurred to a run. He had a head start and meant to keep it.

Somewhere ahead in the dark Dave could hear Jack Law's loud-mouthed shouted orders. He headed in the direction of that voice.

Uncle Billy was gaining on him. The half-dozen drouthed-out cowmen had deployed and were riding about twenty feet apart, standing in their stirrups, saddle carbines gripped.

Jack Law's renegades had tanked up in town and the booze had given them false courage. Their drunken yelling mixed with the rattling gunfire.

The cowmen held their fire until they got something to shoot at. They made it a grim-lipped job. They were hard-working cowmen by trade. Not a killer among 'em. Some of them had wives and kids they'd left behind and they meant, God willing, to get back to the home ranch, and with a few head of cattle. But if this *pasear* called for killing they meant to shoot first and shoot to kill. They had no need of booze for courage. All of them had been in some kind of a gun ruckus like this before and they had no need of further orders. It was every man for himself. They took the fight to the bushwhackers.

The renegades sat their horses behind the brush, yelling at one another to keep up their own courage. Shooting because the kicking recoil of a gun gave them a feeling of power. Most of their shooting was wild, aimless. They were a cold-blooded bushwhacking outfit. They ran in packs like coyotes. Alone, they lacked courage.

THE cowmen rode straight at them. Some of the coyote pack got panicky and quit the brush, shooting back across their shoulders, making a running fight of it. They were shot loose from their saddles. Screams and howls of pain knifed through the gunfire and profane blasphemy fouled the night.

Jack Law's cursing tried vainly to check the running retreat of his cohorts.

Dave felt the whining snarl of bullets and paid no attention. He was hearing only that voice of Jack Law's and he felt that nothing could stop him in his headlong charge.

Uncle Billy spurred alongside him. But Dave did not notice. His lips were flattened back and his white teeth showed. When the old cowman's horse outdistanced him he cussed through his teeth because Uncle Billy was in his way.

Dave sighted Booger Red staggering to his feet like a drunken man. He was hatless and his face was a red smear of blood. Dave shouted something at him as he charged past.

He saw Uncle Billy's horse stumble and try to catch his balance, then go down and his hind quarters go up and the horse turn over. Uncle Billy kicked his feet from the stirrups and let hiself get thrown. He landed in a brush patch and Dave heard him cussing as he pawed free of the thorny cat-claw thicket.

You couldn't tell now who was a renegade and who was a cowman. Half a dozen separate gunfights were in progress. Dave was surrounded by the ruckus. Horses with empty saddles stampeded and milled in a wild tangle.

Dave could no longer hear Jack Law's

shouted cursing. He saw a lone rider spur out from behind the brush and knew it was Jack Law. Making a wide circle around the closed-in fight and headed back towards the Border. He was leaning across the saddle-horn and along the neck of his running horse.

Dave Ryan reined his own horse a little to the left to head him off. Jack Law never saw him until Dave had cut off his escape. Dave let out a yell that straightened the renegade in his saddle. Jack Law's gun spat as he lifted his head and caught sight of Dave. Dave felt the whine of the bullet that fanned by his head.

He was not given to profanity but all the fighting names this same Jack Law had called him in Wyoming—ugly dirty names that Dave had had to take from the man, that had been stored up in a poison sack inside him, came out now into the night for Jack Law to hear—shouted hoarsely, dry-throated, so that they sounded above the intermittent gunfire that was no more than an occasional shot. Dave's voice drowned out the groans of the dying and the whining for mercy those dying renegades had never shown.

Dave held his fire until he got closer. That blast of profanity tended to unnerve the big swashbuckling renegade. It spoiled his aim and his shots went wild.

Dave was within fifty feet of Jack Law now. He could see the man's face in the moonlight. His skin had a white, scared look, and it glistened with sweat. Dave didn't know he'd been shouting until he heard his own voice in his ears and it sounded unreal. When he clamped his jaws shut the sounds ceased. He had the feeling that he had rid himself of some poison, leaving him clean and fearless. He was no longer a coyote running with his tail tucked between his legs.

Jack Law was the man who had run him out of Wyoming, and had told Square Deal he was going to marry Ramona. Here was the man Dave Ryan had sworn to kill. The man with the white face and a gun in his hand that spat flame. Those were his bullets that whined and snarled past Dave Ryan's head. He was close now. Dave threw away his saddle gun, jerked out his sixshooter and thumbed the hammer back.

DAVE stood in his stirrups. He let out a short ugly laugh, and felt the recoil of his gun in his hand. He saw Jack Law jerk as the .45 slug tore through him, and heard his scream of terror as he let go his gun and clawed at his stomach. Dave's second shot tore through both hands. Dave could see Jack's face now clammy with sweat, his jaw slack, a look of terror in his eyes.

Dave reined up and his slivered eyes stared at the man for a long moment, until he went over sideward and backward. Dave rode off a way and stepped off his horse. He felt faint and sat down, resting his head on his chaps-clad knees.

Uncle Billy rode up on a borrowed horse and got down. "You hurt bad, Dave?"

Dave fumbled for a handkerchief and wiped away the cold sweat. His face was drained of blood and it left his skin yellow. He looked up at the old cowman with bloodshot eyes and grinned faintly.

"Where you hurt, Dave?"

Dave picked his hat up off the ground and got to his feet.

"Hurt? Nowheres, I reckon."

"I can't believe it."

Uncle Billy was pawing him all over. He kept looking down at his hands, expecting to find blood there.

"Take a step or two," he urged. "Move your arms. Jack Law emptied his gun at you, and he don't shoot to miss."

Uncle Billy's voice had a waspish crotchety sound.

"You looking for that tobacco you gave me, Uncle Billy, or you trying to pick my empty pockets?" Dave tried to keep the shakiness out of his voice. He was having the same trouble with his knees. "You find Booger Red?" he asked.

"Yeah. Somebody parted his red hair with a thirty-thirty, and he's madder'n a hornet because he made himself a sort of promise to send you back to Ramona Deal with a whole hide. Yonder he comes a-fogging. I tied the cleanest shirt I could find across his head. He looks for all the world like some ugly old hag with a bloody raw shawl tied down under his jaw."

Booger Red was cussing softly as he pulled up. Dave got back on his horse before the

big red-headed cowpuncher could take up pawing him where Uncle Billy had left off.

"Me'n you is sure working the señora overtime with her praying." Booger Red was staring at Dave. "We better get back there."

The renegadees had been wiped out. Every cowman in the outfit had a bullet nick to show for the ruckus, but they were all alive. When Booger Red's Mexicans, having heard the gunfire as they were holding the herd on the bedground, came riding up, their boss told them to stay camped where they were, and to bury Jack Law and his dead renegades in the same long trench.

"There's plenty cattle left in Chihuahua when my *hombrecitos* bring this drive across," said Booger Red. "I'm betting Square Deal will make a live of it. None of you drouthed-out sons will have any trouble getting money out of him now. You can gamble on it.

"You heard Square Deal tell me he was turning the deal over to me. While I got it, I'll squander it." He grinned widely and reached for the neck of a bottle in his chaps. He pulled out a shattered bottle, with a seal across the unpulled cork. As he stared at the broken bottle a look of anguish crossed his face.

"I felt wet along my leg. I figured I was bleeding."

HE LOOKED down at his chaps where a bullet had drilled through the leather pocket. He held the broken bottle and muttered something about using it on the man who spilled his last bottle with a bullet. Then he tossed it away. "The señora says I drink too much. If Square Deal lives, I'll never take another drink. I'm not much of a hand at praying, but I'm throwing in right now with the señora. I hope I'm in for a long drouth. Amen."

Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy said, "Amen." They didn't know that they had heard a prophecy voiced in the night over Chihuahua, Mexico.

The wedding of Dave Ryan and Ramona Deal was celebrated as soon as John Deal was well enough to walk to the altar and give his daugher away. Los Gatos, both sides of the Border, declared a week's fiesta.

Before the wedding, Dave Ryan and Uncle Billy saddled their horses and headed towards Rough Canyon. They rimmed out through the brushy saddle and pulled up to let their horses blow.

Cattle grazed, fattening on the filaree. A big dun-colored stag cautiously horned his way through the thick mansanita thicket and out onto the sandstone rimrock. He stood there motionless as a statue hacked out of yellow sandstone, head lifted, wide black horns shining, nostrils flared. When he got the smell of men and horses on the down wind, his head turned and he looked at the two men on horseback. Big Yaller pawed the sandstone and shook his head from side to side, bawling his raucous challenge that echoed in the rocky walls of Rough Canyon. Then he whirled and was gone, brush popping and crashing as he went down the slope.

Uncle Billy and Dave, loops cocked, grinned as they went down the steep slope in a hell-bent race. When they reached the floor of the canyon, they pulled up. They watched Big Yaller climb the slope until he reached the rimrock. His bellow of victory came down to the two men.

"Big Yaller has put so much taller on them damned ribs," said Dave. "He like to never made it back."

"We're still in the cow business, Dave." Uncle Billy's faded blue eyes were misted. "As long as Big Yaller roams the roughs."

Best Stories of Western Romance and Action in

Our Companion Magazine—

RANCH ROMANCES

OUT EVERY OTHER FRIDAY — NOW ON SALE, 25c PER COPY!

a story by
TEX MUMFORD

BADMAN SAM

. . . didn't know how all-fired mean he could be till the pretty gal came riding along!

SHERIFF ED BARNES was being real careful when he rode up to Sam Tilton's place. Kept his hands up where Sam could see 'em, and gave his mustache a little wiggle that seemed intended as a gesture of peace or something, as he called out:

"Now don't get riled, Sam. This here's a friendly visit."

Sam gave his gun a spin, finger through the trigger-guard—it did beat all how a man with a sudden reputation as a tough one caught himself trying to live up to it—and put the ol' six away. His grin was rueful.

Sam was a medium lean man, six-feet-one-inch tall, and ordinarily he had a disposition that was as mild as butter. He hoped his nature wasn't going to get all switched around on account of his having shot a man recently; and some other things. But he was beginning to wonder.

"Ride in and light down, Ed," he invited.

"Not much time." Sheriff Ed rode on in, glancing around as if afraid somebody might be watching, but he didn't get down.

Leaning over the horn of his saddle he said, in a confiding croak, "Came to warn you Bill Newby's hiring a process server to slap that foreclosure on you."

Sam shoved his hat back on his bonfire of hair. "Last time you was out you said he couldn't get anybody to serve it."

"That's right, he couldn't. Dammit, Sam, we've all knowed you from a pup, and there's not one of us that likes this here idee of you getting shoved off your ranch just because you went and made a temporary fool of yourself. Bill owns the bank, and likes you same as everybody else does, but that wife of his is shoving him hard." Sheriff Ed looked mournful. "You know how women are."

"Sure do," Sam remarked, recalling the two shapely fillies who had taken turns sitting on his lap during a certain card game down in Dragoon. One blonde and one brunette, both of 'em perfumed and purty and cuddly, like he reckoned all saloon gals was.

SHERIFF ED snorted, twitching his mustache indignantly.

"We're not talking about the same thing! Point is, you've got them Cactus Center females up in arms. No man's life is worth living when his woman starts pecking at him. Judge Peddicord refused to sign the papers at first, but couldn't hold out for long. Me, I up and claimed I was too busy to serve 'em, and been catchin' hell ever since. Them women claim they been watching to see if signs of Satan cropped out in you, and now they're plumb convinced you're not fit to run cows here."

"Got a perfect right to," Sam said, bowing his sunburned neck. "Inherited this place, didn't I?"

"Yup. Your old man was as fine an hombre as I ever knowed, even though I did have to jail him about twice a month. Point is, things ain't like they was in the old days. That there Ladies' Club has cleaned up Cactus Center—no more saloons, no shooting, no nothing. Now they're reaching out to purify the whole damn range, and they got their sights beaded on you. If only you hadn't borrowed that money from Bill's bank!"

The loan had been a real good idea. Sam had used the money to buy a new breed of stock, which had worked out fine and dandy on his hilly, coarse-grassed range. A month ago he'd taken his first fall gather to the buyer in Dragoon, a sinful place down on the railroad, and had got a whole wad of money paid into his hand.

The mistake he'd made then was one that came natural, since he'd lone-wolfed it up here for a long spell. Intending to spend a few dollars in kicking up his heels just to see how it felt, saving the rest of the money for his mortgage payment, he'd drifted into a saloon.

He didn't exactly know what had happened after those first drinks. Except that he did remember the girls and the hawk-faced hombre with whom he'd got into a card game. When the hombre fumbled in getting some extra cards out of his shirts sleeve, Sam had called him on it. Not meaning anything much, just asking. Immediately after that he'd got called some fighting names, and had seen a derringer pistol coming out to look him in the eye.

Hadn't been a thing Sam could do but defend himself. The derringer missed, but Sam didn't. Right about then somebody else had pitched into it and busted a bottle over Sam's head, so he woke up in jail. Got released first thing next morning be-

cause the man he'd shot—feller by name of Clint Fall—didn't die.

That didn't put back the money that had clean disappeared from Sam's pocket, though. He'd slunk around Dragoon awhile, not knowing what to do. Sheriff down there promised to look into the matter, though of course, when a man got drunk and got in a saloon fight . . .

Sam had dragged on home.

By the time the story reached Cactus Center it had got blowed up into a real big session of whiskey, women, and hollering, with a near-killing throwed in. Cactus had taken to looking down its nose at Dragoon, anyhow, so people laid it on thick.

Feeling kind of bruised, Sam asked Sheriff Ed, "Who's Bill getting to serve them papers?"

"Dunno yet. His wife made him go to Dragoon to hire somebody. Plenty of tough hard-ups down there."

"Well, I've told him I'm not budging off this place. Him and me had a word agreement, outside of what the mortgage says. Bill told me I could have all the time I needed, and now he turns right around, and . . . Why, I ought to go yank his whiskers out and tromp on 'em!"

Sheriff Ed backed his horse a yard or two, looking worried.

"Now, Sam! Don't you go blaming Bill. He rode range with your dad, same as I did. It's them women that . . . Damn it, if you'd got married and settled down like an ordinary young buck, they wouldn't have had nothing to holler about!"

SAM said darkly, "Not getting married. Going to stick to saloon gals and whisky. If I got the name I might as well have—"

"You're headed straight for hell! Sam you take an old man's advice. Thing for you to do is hang tight and careful. Come spring you'll have a calf crop you can sell, pay Bill off, and shut 'em up. If you see any strangers around here, make yourself scarce. If they can't serve them papers they can't proceed against you—that there's the law." The sheriff glanced around once more. "For gosh sakes, don't shoot somebody up here an' make me arrest you . . . Well, got to be gettin'. Good-by."

Sam moped around his one-room shack for awhile, looking at the Monkey Ward wishbook that topped the three-foot-high stack of magazines and old newspapers beside his favorite chair. Didn't sit down, though. He went out and saddled a horse and took some salt cakes out to the cattle he had settled around Dirty Shirt Spring. Kept an eye out for strangers all the time he was at it; seen one, too.

He didn't actually discover the hombre. It was the other way around. First thing Sam knowed about it was when a bullet howeled past him and he dived off his horse *muy pronto,* knowing he'd had a close call.

He hit the ground hard, sixgun in hand, and reared up his head for a real scared look-around. The sound of the shot slapped his ears about that time, testifying that the rifleman was quite some distance away. Looking in the direction from which it had come Sam saw a Mexican-looking sombrero duck down behind a distant knoll.

Sam never had heard of a summons—or whatever it was they called the papers that yanked a man's ranch out from under him—being delivered by rifle. He rolled into the shelter of an old buffalo wallow and did some cussing.

Having missed his free shot, the hombre on the knoll wasn't risking another. But without a rifle in his hands Sam couldn't do much about him right now. Sixgun wouldn't reach.

He got up and dodged behind some brush and made a bent-over run to the spot where his horse had stopped. Once in the saddle he rode fast and crooked, away from there. His Winchester was down at the shack. What he aimed to do was get it and come right back up here and do a little varmint-hunting, regardless of what Sheriff Ed had said to him.

Sam was going along pretty fast when he approached headquarters. Dismounting while his horse was still running to-

ward the porch, he let his momentum and his long legs carry him up the steps and into the room.

He stopped right there, one hand frozen in mid-reach for the rifle that hung on the wall.

The place was full of the warm, fragrant smell of baking biscuits. A purty gal looked up from the stove, her cheeks rosy, and said:

"Hello. Do you work for Mr. Tilton?"

"I'm—" Sam's jaw sagged down. This here gal wasn't half undressed like the saloon ones had been. Didn't need to be. She was about twenty and she had dark hair and the way she filled out that simple calico dress was plumb— "I'm him," Sam finished lamely.

"I'm Tess Starbuck." Her voice was sweet, like the tinkle of bells. "And don't try to hand me any tall ones, please. I've heard all about your boss, that Mr. Tilton. Just look at this boar's nest he keeps! I'll bet he cheats you on your pay and he's probably out quarreling with his neighbors right now. When I found nobody was home I thought some biscuits might sweeten up the old snapping turtle enough so he'd let me camp down by his corral tonight. I've got my horses in there already."

Sam got his jaw up where it belonged. "How'd you find out he was—"

"From his neighbors, on my way up here. I talk to everybody. Oh, excuse me . . . I've got to take the biscuits out."

WHEN Sam didn't move fast enough she shoved him firmly. Then she opened the oven door and took out a pan of fragrantly brown things that had raised better than any of Sam's biscuits ever had.

His mouth watered, but he was thinking. He'd never had any trouble with his neighbors that he could recall. Nearest of them was ten miles away, anyhow. So he kept on retreating until he'd backed himself out onto the porch, when he turned and loped down to the corral.

What he found there was a two-wheel, beat-up ol' cart piled high with gear. That was outside the corral. Inside it was a bunch of horses, more of them than she ever needed to pull that cart. Having a stockman's alert interest in horseflesh, Sam climbed inside for a close look.

He never had seen such a busted-down, wobble-legged collection in his life. Couple of them was swaybacked draft horses, with collar sores that somebody had been doctoring generously and often with loud-smelling medicine. Another had a milky eye, besides being lame and breathing like he was windbroke. Only one in the bunch looked much good—a flashy chestnut stallion that tossed his head and trotted around real snorty and contrived to nip Sam in a place where it would keep him from sitting comfortable for awhile.

Sam escaped from the corral and stomped back up towards the house. As he did he glimpsed the Mexican sombrero just disappearing behind some brush a hundred yards away. He bounded into the house and got his rifle from the wall this time. Had to get some shells for it, though. So, while he dug them out of a drawer, he said to Tess Starbuck:

"Where'n h—tarnation did you get all them crowbait nags?"

She colored up, real purty. "Oh, everywhere. I—I'm not a good horse-trader, I guess. Dad and I traveled around as long as he lived, and we did all right. But when I tried to keep the business going on my own I messed things up. I just can't help feeling sorry for a sick horse or one that's been abused, so I get them and try to doctor them up, but then I can't find anyone who'll buy them. I went broke down in Dragoon. Oh, I could have sold Pancho, the stallion, but he was dad's horse and always kind of a pet. He's cranky and mean, but—"

She was blushing again. Sam caught himself rubbing the spot where the stallion had nipped him, which wasn't nowise polite in this company, so he left off abruptly.

"Excuse me, ma'am. I got to go out and shoot me a process server."

"A—*what?* Why don't you let your boss do his own—"

"Like I said, I'm him."

"But you can't be! He's a mean old—"

"Dunno about that. But I'm Sam Tilton, for a fact."

She bit her lip. "Well, Mr. Tilton—"

Turning partly away from him she lifted her skirts. Sam's startled eyes caught a glimpse of a mighty shapely leg while she took a folded paper out of the top of her stocking. He still was feeling kind of dizzy when she turned back to him and slapped the paper into his hand.

"I really hate to do this," she told him. "But—there. You've been served."

The paper had some lingo on it that started off like this:

TERRITORY OF ARIZONA, COUNTY OF CACTUS, Proceeding in Foreclosure, to wit: Bank of Cactus vs. Samuel M. Tilton. . . .

He was red-headed mad, now. He stomped towards Tess, with her falling back step by step, her frightened dark eyes scanning his face. When he passed the stove he shoved the summons into its firebox and slammed the door, hard.

"Sneak into a man's house and make biscuits to trap him! I ought to turn you over my knee!"

"Don't you d-dare!"

TESS had backed herself into a corner. As Sam moved closer she glanced wildly around like she was looking for something handy as a weapon.

"Huh! Hired a Mexican to take a shot at me so I'd think he was the one to watch out for and you could—"

"What are you talking about? I don't know anything about any Mexican. I was flat broke down there in Dragoon and I had to do *something*, and Mr. Newby said you were a mean old man who deserved to be foreclosed on, and so I got the job to serve you."

"Bill Newby, huh?"

That woman-prodded banker, not Sam's neighbors, must have told them lies about

[*Turn page*]

ADVERTISEMENT

Will 1956 Be the Year That Changes the World?

A strange man in Los Angeles, known as "The Voice of Two Worlds," is offering, free of charge to the public, an astounding 64 page booklet analyzing famous world prophecies covering these times. It shows that four of the greatest prophecies could not come true until the present time. But now they can, and the years that change the world are at hand. Great dangers but still greater opportunities, confront forward looking people in 1956.

"The Voice of Two Worlds," a well known explorer and geographer, tells of a remarkable system that often leads to almost unbelievable improvement in power of mind, achievement of brilliant business and professional success and new happiness. Others tell of increased bodily strength, magnetic personality, courage and poise.

These strange methods were found in far-off and mysterious Tibet, often called the land of miracles by the few travelers permitted to visit it. He discloses how he learned rare wisdom and long hidden practices, closely guarded for three thousand years by the sages, which enable many to perform amazing feats. He maintains that these immense powers are latent in all of us, and that methods for using them are now simplified so that they can be used by almost any person with ordinary intelligence.

The 64 page booklet he is now offering free to the public gives guidance for those who wish to prepare themselves for the momentous days ahead. It gives details of what to expect, and when. Its title is "Beware of These Days!"

The book formerly sold for a dollar, but as long as the present supply lasts, it is offered free to readers of this notice. This liberal offer is made because he expects that many readers will later become interested in the entire system of mind power he learned in the Far East and which is now ready to be disclosed to the western world.

For your free copy of the astonishing prophecies covering these momentous times, as revealed in this 64-page book, address the Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. T-59, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Send no money. Just your name and address on a postcard or in an envelope will do. No obligation. Readers are urged to write promptly, as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

Sam. Bill's receding chin was going to look real comical without its concealing brush, once Sam got around to him.

Right now Sam had this dark-eyed gal on his mind. And that began, suddenly, to spook him proper. He had that queer, buoyant, kick-up-your heels feeling that the saloon gals had aroused under his lonely brisket. Only worse, this time. Mixed up with his anger like it was, it made him brash as all get-out.

He grabbed Tess Starbuck and what he did was the last thing he'd been expecting to do. He kissed her, thorough-like, finding her startled, parted lips so soft and sweet that he wanted to keep right on at it regardless of who was outside.

Got himself slapped for it. But right after she'd swatted him she gave him a wavery little half-smile. Her dark eyes seemed to say she was more than surprised; sorry about something, too. Whether it was about the summons or the kiss or the slap, no man could tell.

Sam didn't get a chance to find out. A voice from the front yard hollered:

"Hey! Anybody home?"

When he got out on the porch, prudently lugging his rifle, Sam was wondering what had made his knees so wobbly. What he saw out there was a big, hawkish-faced, grinning dark hombre, dressed all in black with plenty of pearl buttons, sitting a fast-looking horse. Had his left arm in a sling. Clint Fall, the man Sam had shot down in Dragoon.

Fall wasn't the only company around. A banty-sized little Mexican with the big sombrero was bobbing up from behind the brush where Sam had seen him hide.

He was hollering excitedly, "Señor Cleent, go 'way from there fas'! That hombre, I 'ave try to shoot heem for you. I theenk I got heem mad!"

Fall looked around at the Mexican. "So that's what you been up to, Hueco. Take it easy." He looked at Sam again. "You don't see me reaching for any gun. I'm real friendly—or aim to be. I don't hold a thing against you. That tangle we had down in Dragoon was just a case of trying to see how much a man could get away with in playing a rube from the hills." He made a toothy smile. "Kind of an amusement, like!" He leaned far over, looking past Sam, and added, "Why, howdy, Miss Tess!"

Her voice, right behind Sam's shoulder, retorted promptly, "Go away! I've told you I don't want anything to do with any darn outlaw!"

Startled, Sam peered around at her. "You know this hombre?"

"Well, he—he's pestered me ever since he found me stuck in a mudhole on my way to Dragoon."

Maybe Fall overheard that. Anyway he called, "Man can't help it when he falls in love, can he? Seen her from the hospital window when she pulled out of town, so what could I do but follow my gal? Besides, if that sheriff down there had got to looking through his reward notices—"

"I'm not your girl!" Tess fired at him.

IT DIDN'T faze Clint Fall a bit.

"Now that Hueco's showed up here, mister, it's two against one, ain't it? You don't aim to try to stand in the way of true love, do you?"

Sam's Adam's apple bobbed up and down his lean neck. All of a sudden he was remembering some things he'd heard about a big, black-shirted outlaw who, with the help of a sawed-off Mexican, had cut a wide swath in the road-agent business up in the north end of the Territory. Killed a few men, too.

Sam backed up, shoving Tess into the house behind him. "Get off my place, Fall!" he ordered.

"Nope." The smile was real glittery now. Like Fall was pleased about something. "Hueco and me have got plenty of time. We'll just wait around out here till you make up your mind to send her out. Or maybe you'll get brave and come out yourself, so we can shoot you!"

Fall made a big hollering laugh and reined away, still without making any move towards his sixgun.

That back, out there, was broad. But, not being cold-blooded enough to shoot a man that was going away from him, Sam

Tilton couldn't do a thing but back the rest of the way into the house and slam the door. Tess was waiting for him in the cluttered room, her face strained.

"I'm sorry, Sam!" she gasped. "Gosh, I feel awful about all this. I only took the darn job because I was stony broke and he'd followed me to Dragoon and I had to get out of there before he got out of the hospital. Sam, what are we going to do?"

"We're going to sit down and eat them biscuits," Sam said darkly. "They're costing me."

The more Sam thought about things, the madder he got. He reckoned you couldn't much blame any man for falling in love with this scared, dark-haired filly who perched stiffly on the edge of her chair across the table from him. Man'd have to be blind, or an utter fool, or old and decrepit, if he didn't. But, hell! That road-agent was forty if he was a day, besides being an outlaw. And here was Sam Tilton, sheltering the gal who'd tricked him.

He didn't know whether he'd done himself any good by burning them papers, or not. The tender, munchful goodness of the biscuits seemed to mock him, stirring up vague yearnings that he could put no name to. He ate without saying a word.

"Sam," the gal told him when they'd finished the coffee she'd made, "this isn't fair to you at all. I'm going out there. Maybe I can get past them, on Pancho."

"You're doing no such of a fool thing!" Sam's neck was bowed, his voice strained. "They'd shoot that horse right out from under you, or something."

He thought of waiting until dark and then sneaking out for a fast run to a neighbor's, where he could send somebody for the law. Then he thought of old Sheriff Ed shooting off his hardware in every direction but the right one, and winced. Winced again when he thought of the way busybody jaws would wag in Cactus Center. "You heard what that highbinding Sam Tilton's done now? Swiped an outlaw's gal away from him and hid her in his house! They had a fight over her, and Sam—"

[*Turn page*]

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit To Surgery

The man condemned to live with rupture, all too often faces a grim future.

There is only one known cure . . . and that is surgical correction. Yet, for many, this relief must be denied or delayed for any one of a variety of reasons. It is to this group of unfortunate persons that this message is directed.

There are two choices—to wear a truss, or not to wear one. But, since hernia never heals itself, and generally continues to become more severe, that leaves only one question in the mind of the hernia sufferer: "What kind of a truss should I wear?" Until recently, the only truss made—a steel and leather contraption dating back to ancient Rome—gouged into your abdomen and rubbed your skin raw. It was uncomfortable, bulky and expensive. It required embarrassing personal fitting. No wonder many hernia victims chose to be semi-invalids and risk danger of strangulation, rather than submit to truss-torture.

Now a New Way to Support Hernia

Less than two years ago a man who suffered from hernia himself devised a new kind of support. It was so totally different that the United States government recognized its exclusive design by granting him a patent.

Now this new device is available to truss-tortured hernia sufferers everywhere. It is revolutionary. There are no steel springs. No leather. No hard, gouging knobs. No unsightly bulk. "RUPTURE-GARD," as this new hernia support has been named is **suspended from the waist.** There are no cruel straps, bands or springs around the hips to chafe and rub. It is as comfortable to wear as a pair of trousers—and just as easy to slip on or off.

RUPTURE-GARD takes care of all inguinal hernia, providing safe protection for the person with double hernia, and desirable "balanced" pressure for the person with hernia on just one side.

The broad, flat pad is firm, yet comfortable foam rubber, covered with strong nylon mesh for cool comfort and complete washability.

You'll like RUPTURE-GARD. If you have hernia—or know someone suffering from this affliction—mail the coupon below. There's no obligation—you'll get complete facts on RUPTURE-GARD by return mail, in a plain envelope!

THE KINLEN CO., Dept. TF-36W
809 Wyandotte, Kansas City 5, Mo.

The Kinlen Co., Dept. TF-36W
809 Wyandotte St., Kansas City 5, Mo.

Rush me in a plain envelope, full information about RUPTURE-GARD.

Name.....

Address..... Zone.....

City..... State.....

It wouldn't be exactly true, but that's the way the gossips would chew it.

Tess tried again. "I'll just go out and give myself up, then. I can slip away from them later, Sam, somehow."

"You'll set right where you're at! No, get up and wash these dishes. And quit looking at me, so's I can think."

She obeyed him, not arguing one bit. But as she gathered up the dishes she begged, "Sam, don't be mean with me. Please."

"Can't help being what I am. Regular ol' snapping turtle, huh?" A rueful grin busted through Sam's severity. "Guess it's my fault he's out there, though, at that. I make a poor stick of a badman. When I shoot 'em they don't stay shot!"

SAM didn't light any lamps, when full dark came. He eased the door open a little and looked out across his range. Finally, some distance away, he located the tiny glow of a cigarette. He went to the back window and saw a light-colored blob of something move furtively among some hummocks, in the starlight. That sombrero . . .

They had Sam, and the dark-haired gal, plumb surrounded.

The moon was prompt about coming up. Sam could see real good after that, but nobody made a solitary move. Those hombres were real careful. They could afford to be. Sam got to thinking that the moon would go down towards morning, at which time he might be able to get his horse, which he'd heard go wandering down to the corral, and ride for help.

Going for Sheriff Ed might be no good, but Sam had some neighbors who were real good shots. Couldn't take the gal out, though. One horse, moving along real careful in the soft sand of the wash, might get away without being heard. Two horses, no. He'd have to leave Tess here alone. So that idea was no good either.

Not being minded to commit suicide by going out there to fight two gunmen at once, Sam was stuck.

"Sam," Tess's small voice said in the dark, "I—I'm scared."

"They're not going to risk coming in here," he told her, although he wasn't any too sure of that himself. "I'll keep watch all night. You lie down on the bunk and try to sleep."

He felt her presence, close beside him. Her lips brushed his cheek briefly. Before he could put down the rifle to make it a proper kiss, she was gone.

"Thanks," her receding voice said, "for being so nice in spite of what I've done to you."

Sam made out all right through the better part of that long night. He'd left the door open and he prowled back and forth, looking out to front and back. He heard the horses trotting around and getting acquainted at the corral. No other sounds, no movement, nothing.

It got to be mighty monotonous for an hombre who usually went to bed at sundown. Thinking to rest his tired feet a little while, he sat down in his chair with the rifle across his knees. Be able to hear anybody who approached the shack. Them dry weeds out there would make plenty of noise. Tired. . . .

He awakened with a jump, and found he'd slid way down in the chair. He was cold and stiff. The first gray light of dawn was coming into the shack. Tess was gone. The note that was propped against the sugar bowl was real scrawly from being written in the dark, but he made out what it said all right. She couldn't stand for him to be in danger on her account, so she was leaving.

Fall and the Mexican were gone, too. Sam found that out when, still only half awake, he charged outside and didn't get shot for it.

Tess' cart still was down at the corral. Her horses, too. All but one of them. Pancho was gone.

The stallion's tracks, Sam saw when he let himself gingerly into his own saddle and followed them, led down the wash and then swung in the direction of Dragoon. Suddenly they got farther apart, with dirt kicked back from them. Tess had put her mount to a sudden run!

Then two other sets of tracks joined up

with them, likewise widely spaced. Fall and his Mex pard had taken right out after Tess. She hadn't got clear.

Sam Tilton had snoozed through the whole thing. He felt plumb sheepish about that. Guilty, too.

The tracks made a sudden turn. This was at the top of a high ridge from which Sam could see Cactus Center way off in the distance. Tess must have seen lights over there, for she had abandoned her idea of getting to Dragoon and had swung toward the nearer town. Likely she had a notion the outlaws wouldn't follow her into a settlement.

BUT she'd been mistaken. The tracks of the pursuing horses kept right along with Pancho's. She wouldn't be getting much help in Cactus, either, even if she'd reached the place. Not from a has-been sheriff and a banker and a few other busted-down old coots, all of them afraid of their jaw-wagging women.

The tracks led Sam Tilton straight to the town. Fall and Hueco had played it real smart. Hueco was stalling around at the end of the single street, effectively blocking it in case the gal tried to escape that way. Looking past the Mexican, Sam saw that Fall had circled around and was jogging into town from the other direction, sitting real easy in his saddle and grinning at the slim filly banging on the locked door of the sheriff's office.

Tess wouldn't know it, but Sheriff Ed didn't sleep in there at all. Ed's old woman claimed the smell of jail disinfectant gave her the hives, so they had 'em a prim little house clear down to the far end of town.

Tess heard Fall's approaching horse. She throwed a sudden fearful look over her shoulder, turned to run, saw Hueco, and stopped dead.

Sam got out his sixgun, and hollered. Hueco came near to jumping right out of his saddle. He slapped big Spanish rowels to his horse and, bent low over the running animal's neck, shrilled:

"Señor Cleent! That hombre—"

[*Turn page*]

"TOOK IN $217 FIRST 10 DAYS"

Some make more, some less

We help you to start Your Own All-Year Business

Make Big Money! With our easily operated, highly efficient wall washer, Chas. Stelle took in $217 gross in first ten days. E. L. Goss took in more than $10,000 in one year. E. C. Taber wrote, "*I made $400 gross in two weeks.*" And no wonder—this machine washes walls 6 times faster and better than by hand. **Your Money-making Opportunity.** Enjoy *independence*—freedom from bosses, layoffs. Customers everywhere—homes, offices, schools, etc. Expenses low, profits high. No shop necessary; operate from home. Can start spare time until your full time is available.

Lose no time. Get all facts without obligation

FREE BOOK! MAIL COUPON TODAY!

VON SCHRADER MFG. CO.
341 "W" Pl., Racine, Wisconsin

Send at once (no obligation) your FREE booklet containing information about your WALL WASHING MACHINE and how I can start my own permanent, profitable business.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ Zone _____ State _____

Make money!
ADDRESS and MAIL POSTCARDS at HOME
Write today!
MR. KAY, BOX 14, BELMONT, MASS.

ARTHRITIS—RHEUMATISM VITAL FACTS EXPLAINED

FREE DESCRIPTIVE BOOK

How crippling deformities may be avoided. This amazing FREE BOOK explains why ordinary methods give only temporary relief—if that. Describes a drugless method of treatment successfully applied in thousands of cases. Write for this 44-page FREE BOOK today. No obligation.

BALL CLINIC, DEPT. 504, EXCELSIOR SPRINGS, MO.

AUTO MECHANICS

GOOD PAY FOR YOU IN THE NO. 1 TRADE

LEARN AT HOME

Why settle for less—when you can learn Auto Mechanics—America's No. 1 trade! *It offers you better jobs, higher pay, lifetime security.* Earn up to $125 a week and more. Train at home in spare time the easy, practical CTI way. Get valuable tools and Tune-Up Kit. *Write for new,* FREE BOOK.

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE Dept. A-170
1400 Greenleaf Avenue • Chicago 26, Ill.

Things happened awful fast for awhile, there in Cactus town. Clint Fall dismounted with a swoop and grabbed Tess and swung her around in front of him. That made Sam shooting mad. Since he couldn't shoot at Fall now, he shot at Hueco. Missed. Which was to be expected when a man was fool enough to fire from the back of a running horse.

Didn't miss the big front window of Bill Newby's bank, though. The glass shattered with a sound like an explosion. Sparkling flinders of it scattered all over the sidewalk in the first rays of the rising sun.

Hueco's horse shied violently at the sudden racket, so that the Mexican, who was twisted around trying to get a shot at Sam, got spilled from his saddle. Hueco hit the ground and rolled end over end in the dust. Came up with his gun still in his hand, but saw that Sam now was almost on him, aiming grimly. Hueco throwed away his gun real quick, and reached up his hands as high as he could.

Sam heard Tess' frightened scream. Just as he looked towards the road-agent and the gal he saw Sheriff Ed come running down the street, pulling suspenders up over his underwear and brandishing a gun. Ed could have Hueco. Clint Fall was the one that counted now.

The outlaw was having himself a painful time, trying to hold the struggling girl with his sling-hampered left arm so he could shoot past her. Tess struggled real good. She stamped a boot heel down on Fall's instep, so he had to give it up. Flinging her away from him, he dropped down behind the town watering-trough and leveled his gun across the top of it.

Sam was in plenty danger now. Piled off his horse real quick, and hunkered down. But about that time Tess, who had brushed her dark hair back from her face so she could look around for a weapon, found one. She yanked the handle of the wooden pump out of its socket and she hit Fall with it.

She was too excited to take good aim, but she did well enough. The pump handle glanced off Fall's shoulder. He lurched over and dropped his six into the water.

Sam ran over. Fall was getting up, giving Tess a look that had nary a bit of true love in it. Suddenly that derringer seemed to pop right out of Fall's sling and into his hand.

Should have remembered that belly-gun, Sam though despairingly, as he slammed out a hurried shot from the gun he'd let sag.

IT WAS a lucky shot, the kind he couldn't have made again if he tried a hundred times. The bullet yanked Fall's gun-hand way back and that spun him around. When he stopped turning he looked down at a hand that wasn't much use any more. The derringer was plumb gone. A kid found it later, up on top of the blacksmith shop porch.

Glad that he still hadn't killed anybody, badman Sam Tilton looked around when he heard Sheriff Ed coming up with Hulco. "Who in hell," Ed wanted to know, "are all these here people?"

"Regular convention, sure is," Sam said with a meager grin. "Shot up your town, too—gives folks something to talk about. I'll help you put these hombres in your jail. Should you get to looking through your wanted notices I suspect you'll find 'em described there."

When Sam came out of the sheriff's office awhile later, Bill Newby was looking at his ruined bank window. Sam said, "Mean ol' snapping turtle, am I? Well it didn't do you a bit of good. I burned them papers up."

"Don't make a bit of difference, once they been served," the banker retorted. He was craning his neck to look past Sam and towards something down the street.

Looking around, Sam saw that Tess was down there, surrounded by townswomen who'd be asking a lot of prying questions about now. That made Sam mad all over again. He tapped old Bill's chest saying:

"I never was much of a hand for reward money, but them two hombres in Ed's jail are wanted ones, and I suspect I'll have enough money coming my way to buy you a window and pay that mortgage

installment. So you can't either foreclose, and how do you like that?"

Sam gave Bill's whiskers a yank that didn't quite take 'em off, and started towards the gal. Turned his head, though, to add, "Likely I'll have something left over, too, for a honeymoon I'm figuring on!"

The young rancher walked springy-legged, and real full of brash, evading a playful nip that was aimed at him by a saddled stallion that he passed. The gal broke away from the old women and went running to meet him.

The prompt way they got their arms around each other told Bill Newby all he wanted to know.

Everything had worked out beautifully, even including the unexpected fireworks. About the time the young folks fetched around their first kid, showing him off, Bill would get up nerve to tell them how clever he'd been to pick a likely-looking young gal to serve them papers.

THE TRAIL BOSS

(Continued from Page 6)

a keg of $20 gold pieces destined for the Coos Bay Bank. Within hours the beach was swarming with humanity like ants attacking a picnic spread.

Townspeople literally tore the region apart; they dug holes; they probed the sand with long rods; they burned the midnight oil trying to dope out, via mathematics and the incoming tide, where the wreck might be. But it all came to nothing. Not a timber of the treasure ship was ever found again.

The two men who had found the wreck and salvaged a few bucks worth of copper, not knowing they were passing up a fortune in gold, felt like blowing their brains out.

And there the matter rests and has rested for decades. The gold is still there, somewhere within the constantly moving sand-hills, defying discovery. Old-timers still prowl the beach, keeping an eye out for telltale ship timbers.

But in this scientific age, what with all the trick gadgets for locating buried metals, some bright lad just might ferret out the treasure with a mine detector or some such. I might pick up a few gadgets and give the Coos Bay Treasure a whirl myself. Unless, of course, *you* get there and find it first!

HANDS TIED?

—because you lack a HIGH SCHOOL DIPLOMA

• You can qualify for an American School Diploma *in spare time at home!* If you have left school, write or mail coupon for FREE booklet that tells how. No obligation of any kind.

OUR 58TH YEAR

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H358
Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37, Illinois

Please send FREE High School booklet.

Name.....

Address.....

City & State.....

Canadian Residents: Complete Canadian Course Available. Write American School, 1610 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal.

OWN a Business

If employed, start part time. Alert dealers can gross $5 hourly profit plus $3 on EACH serviceman. Clean, revive, mothproof rugs & upholstery on location. No shop needed. We locally train & assist you. Nationally advertised world-wide service. Quickly established. Easy terms. Send today for FREE booklet. No obligation.

DURACLEAN CO. 6-693 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Ill.

RUPTURED

BE *FREE* FROM TRUSS SLAVERY

NOW there is a new modern **Non-Surgical** treatment that permanently corrects rupture. These **Non-Surgical** treatments are so certain, that a Lifetime Certificate of Assurance is given. Write today for our New FREE Book that gives facts that may save you painful and expensive surgery, and tells **how non-surgically** you may again work, live, play and love and enjoy life in the manner you desire. There is no obligation.

Excelsior Hernia Clinic Dept. 9805. Excelsior Springs, Mo.

FREE FOR ASTHMA

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO. 359-A FRONTIER BLDG.
462 NIAGARA ST. BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

BE A *Nurse*

MAKE $50-60 A WEEK

You can learn practical nursing at home in spare time. Course endorsed by physicians. Thousands of graduates. 57th yr. One graduate has charge of 10-bed hospital. Another saved $400 while learning. Equipment included. Men, women 18 to 60. High school not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING
Dept. 423, 25 East Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill.

Please send free booklet and 16 sample lesson pages.

Name.....

City.....*State*.....*Age*.....

Together they watched the Kid mount and ride north

REST YOUR SADDLE

By L. J. SEARLES

THE posse, the fugitives reckoned, was an uneasy six hours behind them. They followed the moon's pale-fading ghost, the land of Devil's Basin purpling around them and the Timpahutes making a faint jagged line across the sky. Whitey was in the saddle, slumped Indianlike, gently swaying; it was his turn to ride. Rance Pondevero trailed, stumbling, swearing softly. The silence of the near dawn wrapped itself about them.

Crossing the scattered adobe brick of Indian Wells, Pondevero lurched hugely and grabbed the buckskin's tail. He was already off-balance and his young strength had flowed out somewhere into the past night. He pivoted wildly on one boot heel and spun completely around. For a brief moment he thought, grotesquely, that he would keep spinning until he whirled off the edge of the world.

He heard Whitey's sharp "Ho!" bringing the buckskin to a halt, and his shoulders slammed against the horse's off flank. He braced himself there and drew a long, ragged breath.

Whitey turned in the saddle and looked down at him, the years showing dull in his sun-faded eyes.

"Far enough."

Pondevero shook his head impatiently.

Whitey figured the best way to stop a badman was before he started, or as soon afterward as possible

"You shouldn't ought to have turned that claybank loose at Iron Springs. He could have made six-seven more miles on that leg."

"He was a good horse," Whitey said evenly. "He deserved a chance."

"No more than we do," Pondevero observed. "Look back. What can you see?"

"Sun starting to show over the rim. There might be some dust trailing out from Iron Springs. Nothing more."

Pondevero disgustedly grunted, "Agh!" He beat his fist abstractedly against the buckskin's slowly heaving barrel. "They've found the claybank. Now they will fan out. By tomorrow that damn posse will have the basin circled. We'll have to keep going."

"No," said Whitey. "This is your first time, so listen to me."

"I'm too tired to argue," Pondevero said with vast weariness.

Whitey swung down from saddle. "We keep going," he said, "and they'll spot our dust and head straight for us. We'll hole up here until sundown and make for the west rim tonight."

THE sun was balanced atop the Pahranagats by the time they spread their blankets, and the shadows were slipping down the sides of the Timpahutes like the slow unveiling of a gigantic mounment.

Pondevero said, between vicious bites of jerky, "Dammit, we didn't even hurrah a dog in Alamo. We had to run before we even washed the dust out of our craws. When does it stop, Whitey? When can you ride into a town without looking out for lawmen? When can you stop running?"

Whitey thumbed his stetson back. His hair gleamed steel-white above his weather-darkened face. "Why, the first way is to stop before you start. The second way is to pay your debts and start clean again. I missed the first and piled up too many debts for the second."

Pondevero chewed a last bite of jerky, briefly considering this. Suddenly he laid his ear against the ground. He remained in that position for a few moments, intently listening. Then he jerked quickly to his feet, facing Whitey.

"Rider coming!"

[*Turn page*]

Learn Facts About Colitis and Piles

FREE BOOK Explains Causes, Effects and Treatment

Learn about Colon troubles, Stomach conditions, Piles and other rectal conditions. Causes, effects and treatment. 130-page book sent FREE. McCleary Clinic and Hospital, 397 Elms Blvd., Excelsior Springs 4, Mo.

FREE NECKTIES AND RAZOR BLADES **NO** STRINGS ATTACHED

5 Beautiful Ties—$1. Prepaid. Newest fashions, finest fabrics, values up to **$3.50** from bankrupt stores & mfg. close-outs. If not satisfied return 4 ties get $1 back. Keep your FREE tie. FREE 16 blades with 10 ties, 1 or more people ordering. Sell to dealers. 30 ties & 100 blades—$5. Refund guarantee by Surety Bond.

GRAND TRADING CO., MINOT 5, N. D.

Shrinks Hemorrhoids New Way Without Surgery

Science Finds Healing Substance That Relieves Pain—Shrinks Hemorrhoids

For the first time science has found a new healing substance with the astonishing ability to shrink hemorrhoids and to relieve pain — without surgery.

In case after case, while gently relieving pain, actual reduction (shrinkage) took place.

Most amazing of all — results were so thorough that sufferers made astonishing statements like "Piles have ceased to be a problem!"

The secret is a new healing substance (Bio-Dyne*)—discovery of a world-famous research institute.

This substance is now available in *suppository* or *ointment form* under the name *Preparation H.** Ask for it at all drug counters—money back guarantee. *Reg. U. S. Pat. Off.

Whitey said, thoughtfully, "Can't be posse. Not yet."

"Pahute?"

"Not this time of year. They've all left for the southern herd."

"We'll see," Pondevero said softly. "We'll see."

They could hear it distinctly now, the soft-muffled hoof rhythm and the thin crackling of brush riding on the northern breeze. Pondevero took three leaping strides to the buckskin and gripped the horse's muzzle. With his free hand he drew his gun. He stood there, frozen like that, tensely waiting. Whitey silently faded into some obscure shadows.

A horse's questing nicker came, far reaching, far searching. Pondevero's hand tightened over the buckskin's nostrils. In a few moments the rider came into view, riding easy and unafraid, a slim figure crimson-touched in the dawn's ripening. He wore a sodbuster's straw hat pushed far back over red hair, and his mouth was puckered in a tuneless whistle.

Whitey stepped out from the shadows, dropping his Colt back into leather. He said, his voice rising in its surprise:

"Good Lord, it's a kid!"

"It's a horse," Pondevero said flatly. He stepped to Whitey's side.

The buckskin whickered plaintively.

The kid dug in his heels, jogging his calico pony straight for them. He pulled up with an extravagant flourish of the reins, said, "Howdy," in a voice young and quick, and gazed down at them with candid intentness. He made no move to dismount, solemnly obeying a frontier code as old as the conquistadores, as old as the dust.

"Climb down," Whitey invited gravely. "Rest your saddle."

They waited while the kid off-saddled and tied the pony beside the buckskin. They waited patiently, faintly puzzled, each deep in his own devious thoughts. The kid was twelve maybe, or thirteen, with a shock of fiery red hair and a sprinkling of freckles across his nose and cheek-bones. He held his thin shoulders straight as he came to meet them, and there was a suggestion of a tired swagger in his stride.

Whitey queried, "Come far?"

The kid gestured vaguely northward. "Up yonder. I ran away from home." He added importantly, "Figured I'd hear the old owl hoot some."

Pondevero cocked a mildly sardonic eyebrow. "You see anybody? Run into any riders?"

"Naw. Some dust haze stretching out from Alamo way. Another posse, maybe." The kid considered this last thought with a derisive scowl. "That sheriff down there is always sending out posses."

"A bad habit," Whitey said, drily gentle.

"Look," the kid said eagerly, "are you hombres riding the grub line? Can I ride with you?"

Whitey laid his hand on the kid's shoulder. "Let's all talk it over later."

Pondevero and Whitey sprawled out on their blankets and watched the kid, hunkered against a pile of broken adobe, chewing absently on a twig of salt brush and trying to pretend he wasn't hungry."

Pondevero whispered finally, "The poor damn button's half starved. We could give him some of them biscuits and jerky before we take his horse."

WHITEY said, letting his voice carry, "Kid, sorry we haven't got any grub to offer you."

"Not hungry, anyway," the kid answered carelessly, and almost covered up the small tone of disappointment.

"Why, hell—" began Pondevero.

Whitey coughed violently. "Sorry. Them bum lungs of mine."

Pondevero said, startled, "I didn't know you was a lunger."

"Too many years sleeping in sorry camps and thin blankets. That's what you get listening to the owl hoot. But you don't think of them things when you're younger."

Whitey went on, never changing his level tone: "Things is sure bad for the hombre riding the grub line nowadays. Don't even get good food any more. Now if I was back home I'd be eating a fresh-cut steak with potatoes and gravy and a hunk of apple pie

to top it off. My ma is sure a good cook. She sure is."

Pondevero said skeptically, "I thought you told me you was brung up in an—"

Whitey coughed again. "Them damn lungs."

The kid came awkwardly to his feet, trying too carefully to make the movement look casual. He turned to the two men as if to say something, then changed his mind, blinked his eyes rapidly and walked toward the horses.

Pondevero rose with an unhurried catlike movement. "Might as well give him the news now before he forks that broomtail."

Whitey murmured, "Huh-uh."

Pondevero looked down. He looked straight into the muzzle of Whitey's sixgun. He said, ever so softly, "Well, I'll be damned," and held motionless.

Together they answered the kid's laconic "So long," and watched him mount and ride north. He made a small and lonesome shape.

Pondevero said, "Reckon he decided he didn't want to hear the owl hoot."

"He wants a piece of apple pie," Whitey said, and holstered his gun.

"You're not a lunger?"

"I lie good, don't I?"

"And you was brung up in an orphan home."

"A born maverick, slick-eared and raised on sour milk." Whitey laced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. "I had red hair like that once," he added musingly, and his voice carried its own regretting melody.

"Don't say," Pondevero said, thinking of something else, thinking of "The first way is to stop before you start."

He faced eastward, holding his gaze along their backtrail. The dust haze glinted mistily, stretching out tenuous arms toward them, soft, soft under the floating mountains, soft under the sun's low-hanging warmth. His mind groped for an answer he had pushed carelessly into some dark corner. It was, "The second way is to pay your debts and start clean again."

"Good luck, Whitey," Pondevero said.

He walked toward the rising sun.

MORE JOBS—BIG PAY IN
AIR CONDITIONING
& REFRIGERATION

NEW WAY TO LEARN AT HOME

MAKE MORE MONEY in this *uncrowded* field. New CTI *Shop-Method* teaches repair and installation at home. *You get 23 big practical training kits*—you build and keep an air conditioner, freezer, refrigerator or milk cooler. Earn up to $5 an hour while training. *Write for new FREE BOOK.*

COMMERCIAL TRADES INSTITUTE Dept. R-142
1400 Greenleaf Avenue • Chicago 26, Ill.

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 39, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION OF Triple Western, published quarterly at Kokomo, Ind., for October 1, 1955. 1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Literary Enterprises, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Editor, James B. Hendryx, Jr., 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. Managing Editor, None. Business Manager, Harry Slater, 10 E. 40th St., New York, N. Y. 2. The owner is: Literary Enterprises, Inc., 10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, 10 E. 40th St., New York 16, N. Y. 3. The known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. Paragraphs 2 and 3 include, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting; also the statements in the two paragraphs show the affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner. Harry Slater, business manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of October, 1955. Jules Goldner, Notary Public. (My commission expires March 30, ~~1956~~) 1958

Save for the Future

Saving for security is easy! Here's a savings system that really works—the Payroll Savings Plan for investing in United States Savings Bonds.

Go to your company's pay office, choose the amount you want to save. That money will be set aside for you before you even draw your pay. And invested in Bonds which are turned over to you.

If you can save only $3.75 a week on the Plan, in 9 years and 8 months you will have $2,137.30.

U.S. Series "E" Savings Bonds earn interest at an average of 3% per year, compounded semiannually, when held to maturity! And they can go on earning interest for as long as 19 years and 8 months if you wish, giving you back 80% more than you put in!

For your sake, and your family's, too, how about signing up today? Or join the Bond-A-Month Plan where you bank.

THE STAGE COACH

A Cargo of Range Facts and Oddities

BUFFALO BILL is probably revolving in his grave—but don't ever call him Whirling Willie—at the way buffalo are now being branded. A fire-fighting pump squirts them with paint from a low-flying plane.

* * * * *

Cowboy Star Roy Rogers got his break in pictures in a tailor shop. He overheard another cowpoke tell the tailor about an audition for cowboys that was going on. Roy hurried out of the shop, got an audition and a job. A real case of being tailor-made, you might say.

* * * * *

A sign at Big Bend National Park in Texas sums up the feeling of the wide open spaces out thataway:

"The sun is riz
The sun is set
And here I is
In Texas yet."

* * * * *

At Browning, Montana, the Blackfeet Indians recently held a powwow to pray for an oil strike. It was supposed to be an affair chiefly for braves, but a small, wrinkled old woman stole the show. She was 83-year-old Otter Woman Morning Gun, owner of the land on which drilling has started. Come gusher or dry hole, the impassive Mrs. Morning Gun already has struck it rich. A shrewd trader, she has obtained $55,821 for the right to drill on her land, plus a 12½ percent royalty on any oil found. Quite a pistol, Mrs. Gun!

* * * * *

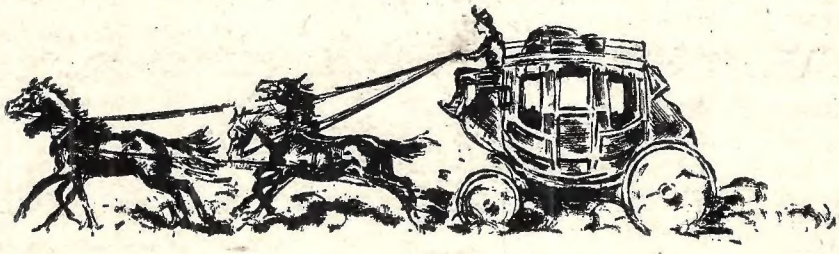
Epitaph on a tombstone near Cripple Creek, Colorado reflects the blunt humor of the old-time Westerners: "He Called Bill Smith A Liar."

* * * * *

The symbolic animals of America's frontier days, Texas longhorn cattle, now number more than 500. Close to extinction less than 25 years ago, the majority of longhorns that survive of herds that once numbered thousands are now maintained on national wildlife refuges under Federal protection. A few are still kept by private owners. The largest herd in the country, 376 animals, is held on the Wichita Mountains Refuge near Cache, Okla.

* * * * *

The forerunner of the Western saddle was brought to the Southwest by Cortez in 1519. Upon the pommel Mexican vaqueros later attached a "horn," to which a lariat could be secured. Pay no mind to the rumors that it was to disperse traffic. 'Twarn't a tooting horn at all.



Can you profit by their mistakes?

"Not getting enough education"

You needn't make that mistake. You can get that better job, those big promotions, the regular raises that so many I. C. S. students report. And you can do it without "going to school," without interfering with your present job or your social life.

YOU can study with I. C. S. at home, in your spare time!

"Wrong choice of career"

When you study with I. C. S. you have 277 courses to choose from. And part of our job here at I. C. S. is not only giving you instruction but making sure you pick the course that's right for you!

YOU get expert guidance FREE from I. C. S.!

"Failed to seize opportunities"

Your opportunity is right here on this page. Don't pass it by. Don't put it off. Mail the coupon now and let us send you our 3-book career kit.

YOU get 3 FREE books if you mail the coupon today!

1. 36-page gold mine of information, "How to Succeed."
2. Career Catalog outlining opportunities in your field.
3. Sample I. C. S. lesson (Math.).

For Real Job Security—Get an I.C.S. Diploma! **I.C.S., Scranton 9, Penna.**

Postage Will Be Paid by Addressee

No Postage Stamp Necessary If Mailed in the United States

BUSINESS REPLY CARD

FIRST CLASS PERMIT No. 1000, Sec. 34.9 P. L. & R. SCRANTON, PA.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

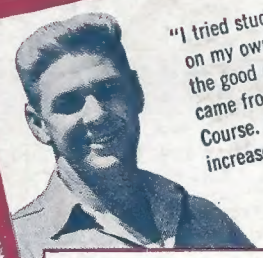
1000 WYOMING AVENUE

SCRANTON 9, PA.

Box 99603-A

ARE YOU TOO OLD TO LEARN?

not at all, scientists say



"I tried studying my work on my own, but I never got the good out of it that came from my I. C. S. Course. My salary has been increased 73.3%!"
E.L.B.
Ohio

New tests show that: your ability to think increases with age; your powers of deduction are greater; your judgment is better.

In the I. C. S. files are thousands of cases of men and women of every age. Their successes, their promotions, their raises prove that men and women past school age can learn!

I.C.S. GIVES YOU EXPERT GUIDANCE FREE! Do you have the feeling you're "stuck" in your job? Your trained I.C.S. counselor will appraise your abilities, help you plan for the future.

IT'S NEVER TOO LATE TO GET STARTED! You study with I.C.S. at home, in your spare time. There's no interference with business or social activity. Famous I.C.S. texts make learning easy. Don't delay. Pick your field from the coupon below. And mail it today!

"I am president of a small corporation. A year ago I enrolled with I. C. S. as the most practical means available to me to learn what I needed."
W.J.A.
Michigan

"It's been so long since I went to school, I've forgotten much. But now that I'm taking an I. C. S. Course, I have confidence in my ability again."
H.A.R.
New Jersey

Actual statements. Posed by models.

3 FREE BOOKS

36-page, pocket-size guide to advancement, a gold mine of tips on "How to Succeed." Big catalog outlining opportunities in your field of interest. Also sample lesson (Mathematics).

For Real Job Security—Get an I. C. S. Diploma! **I. C. S., Scranton 9, Penna.** Member, National Home Study Council

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 99603A, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

(Partial list of 277 courses)

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW to SUCCEED" and the opportunity booklet about the field BEFORE which I have marked X (plus sample lesson):

ARCHITECTURE and BUILDING CONSTRUCTION
- ☐ Air Conditioning—Refrig.
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Architectural Interior
- ☐ Building Contractor
- ☐ Building Maintenance
- ☐ Carpenter and Mill Work
- ☐ Estimating
- ☐ Heating
- ☐ Painting Contractor
- ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Reading Arch. Blueprints

ART
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Sketching and Painting

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Public Accounting
- ☐ Creative Salesmanship
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Letter-writing Improvement
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Professional Secretary
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chem. Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Plumbing Drawing and Estimating
- ☐ Structural Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrician ☐ Contracting
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ Mathematics

LEADERSHIP
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Leadership and Organization
- ☐ Personnel-Labor Relations

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment ☐ Metallurgy
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Quality Control
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Tool Design ☐ Toolmaking

RADIO, TELEVISION
- ☐ Industrial Electronics
- ☐ Practical Radio TV Eng'r'ng
- ☐ Radio and TV Servicing
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Television Technician

RAILROAD
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Section Foreman

STEAM AND DIESEL POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Elec. ☐ Diesel Eng's
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

TEXTILE
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Loom Fixi'g ☐ Textile Des'ing
- ☐ Textile Eng'r'g ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Warping and Weaving

MISCELLANEOUS
- ☐ Domestic Refrigeration
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Ocean Navigation
- ☐ Professional Engineering
- ☐ Short Story Writing
- ☐ Telephony

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

Occupation_____

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools, Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada. . . . Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces.